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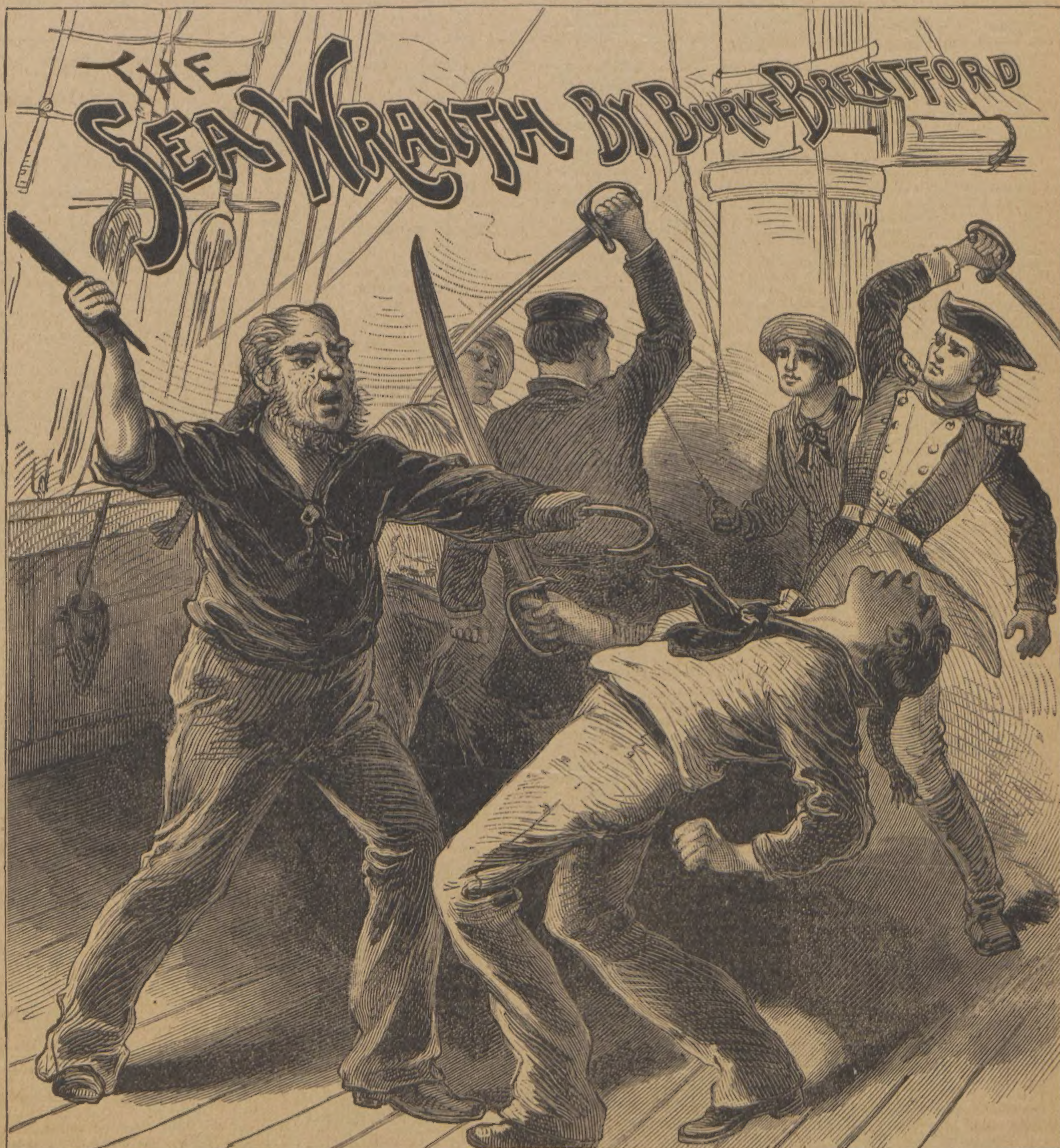
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"HURRAH FOR THE STARS AND STRIPES! SWOOP 'EM IN, MY HEARTIES!" HE SHOUTED.

The Sea Wraith;

OR,

THE PRIVATEER PRINCE.

A Romance of Broadides, Boarders
and Blue Waters.

BY BURKE BRENTFORD,

AUTHOR OF "DAUNTLESS DICK," "THE PRIVATEER FREE LANCE," "THE SEA SCOUT,"
"THE SEA SWEEPER," "BARNACLE BEN," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE MYSTERIOUS SCHOONER.

A BEAUTIFUL girl, Jessie Heartwell by name, stood expectantly on a pine-grown knoll of the Shinnecock Hills facing the wild, sea-beat south shore of Long Island, on a lovely morning of the early summer of 1812.

Behind her, embosomed in its roadside elms and maples, lay the quaint little hamlet of Quogue, which was her home. Further to the eastward, one from this standpoint could see the scattered white houses of the yet smaller hamlet of Good Ground. And yet further on, there was the twinkle of the two church spires and numerous weather-vanes belonging to the more considerable settlement of old Southampton, nestling prettily, as at this day, under the ragged sandy range of the Shinnecocks, with the rolling sand dunes and great level stretches of ocean beach between it and the foam-tipped waves.

Jessie's immediate home, where she had lived all her life with her old aunt and older uncle, Captain Bob Blowlock, or, more familiarly Iron-hook Blowlock, stood isolated in its pretty garden but a few biscuit-tosses distant, though not visible from the point she occupied.

Jessie Heartwell was nearing her eighteenth year; she was a pronounced blonde, and esteemed by long odds as the prettiest and most amiable girl on the south shore.

Even her prim, Puritanic garb could not conceal her arch spiritedness of mien and air. In fact, this was a rare young beauty, in that she was seldom if ever conscious of her charms.

We have said that the young girl seemed expectant. She was so, and with a soft heightening of color in the fair cheeks that was sufficiently suggestive. And yet, now and then her glance strayed from the path leading to the rushy and island-reaching inlet near at hand to contemplate, with mingled doubt and curiosity, a vessel that rocked lazily at anchor on the long ground-swell of sunlit offing about a mile from shore.

It was a large, low-lying, black-hulled schooner, trim of rig, rakish sparred, and seeming, in spite of her extra size, as if a mere puff of wind, seconded by the will of her commander, would cause her to wing away over the bright ocean with the ease and swiftness of a care-free bird.

"The smuggler still here!" said Jessie to herself, at last sinking impatiently into a rustic seat and taking in hand some sewing she had brought with her from the cottage. "How I wish she would trip anchor and be off! Smuggler, pirate, British spy, or what not, I can but feel a possible danger from her for either Frank"—her color deepened at the name even in thought—"or me, or perhaps both. Besides, that odious skipper, Courtold! it is evident that he will give me no peace as long as he haunts the shore hereabouts. A plague on a man that can't or won't take no for an answer! If Frank only could discover the true character of the craft!"

She started to her feet eagerly at the sound of an approaching step along the shaded path, though with an almost instant change of demeanor, for the man who appeared was other than Frank Freeway, the lover she was expecting.

A well enough appearing man, too, in his way, this unwelcome intruder upon the young girl's morning tryst. Nearly, if not quite, middle-aged, it is true, but stalwart and sailor-like, his dark bronzed features, or such of them as were not hidden away by his bushy black beard, comely and expressive, and with a general confident air of command, notwithstanding that his garb, including a brace of pistols and a hanger in his belt, was but a remove or two above that of a common sailor.

In fact, it was none other than the personage who had rather disagreeably crossed Jessie's thoughts at the moment of his appearance—Courtold, the smuggler, as he had come to be slightly known to the simple folk along shore, and the master of the mysterious schooner in the offing.

Regardless of the unflattering look of disappointment which his coming had so obviously caused, the man, with a slight homage in recognition of the young girl's unusual beauty, Courtold, approached her with a resolute, almost stern air.

"Here I am again, Jessie," he said, his deep

voice becoming low and sweet as he proceeded. "You mightn't expect it from the many rebuffs you have given me, but it is so, as you see, and perhaps for the last time; for to-day I must up anchor and away."

As she quietly resumed her seat, deigning no answer, he went on:

"I simply love you to distraction, my girl! that is my only excuse. Can't you even speak to a poor devil, whose only misfortune is loving you hopelessly?"

"Sir—Mr. Courtold—why do you thus persecute me?" cried Jessie, at last.

"Persecute you?"

"Yes; you forever rave of love, and yet I could not even like you, if I would. Haven't I told you so, often and frankly enough? Good-by!" she coldly extended her hand. "I don't wish to be unkind, sir, but—I am glad that you are going. There, now!"

Disregarding both her words and her hand, he grasped her wrist.

"Jessie, you must think better of me—I shall not permit you to fly in the face of your fate!" he exclaimed, earnestly. "As my bride, it would be a fair, a brilliant fate for you. Child, listen to me. I am other and far higher than I seem. Though I am restrained by my duty from declaring my true rank at present, still as my wife—"

"I care not who you are or what your rank may be!" cried Jessie, angrily wrenching her wrist free, for she had heard something of these mysterious lints of greatness in disguise before. "I care nothing for you, and I never want to see you again."

"So!" with a sneer; "the young skipper, Freeway, is doubtless before me in your affections?"

"Don't flatter yourself even that much, Captain Courtold," spiritedly. "You were never in them at all, nor could you be."

"Still, the young skipper?" continued the man, with his strange persistence.

"Mind your own business! Are you a fool, Captain Courtold, that you must be told so repeatedly that I detest you?"

"Is it because I am an Englishman?"

"No; not particularly. It is just because—it is so."

"Jessie, satisfy my curiosity on a certain point."

"Well, sir?"

"You once hinted to me that I vaguely reminded you of another man who had once insulted you."

"That is true."

"What man was that?"

"A titled Britisher, a certain Lord Oldcourt," Jessie vouchsafed to reply, after some hesitation. "He was a lieutenant on board a British frigate or sloop-of-war, the Menelaus, that was in New York Harbor last summer. I was visiting my grandmother there, and attended a grand garden-party in the Battery Park. Lord Oldcourt tried to carry me off to his ship, and might have succeeded in his baseness but for the intervention of my lov—of Captain Freeway and other friends. That is all. I hope you are satisfied."

"Humph! So I put you in mind of the audacious lordling?"

"Yes."

"In what way?"

"I don't know."

"Do I resemble him in my person?"

"Yes and no. I neither know nor care whether you do or not."

Courtold suddenly burst into a loud laugh, a bold, resolute light springing into his face and eyes.

"Why not imitate him in action as well?" he cried. "Jessie, my beauty, I can't do without you, and the Nancy Jane yonder is pining for the tread of a sea-queen upon her brave deck. You must be mine!"

He at once engulfed the young girl, as it were, in his powerful grasp, at the same time sounding a peculiar note from a whistle which he placed to his lips.

Jessie had only time to give a single faint cry for help before she was silenced by his strong hand over her mouth.

But, almost at the same instant there was an angry shout from near at hand, the sound of a bounding step from over the back of the hill, and the young girl's laggard lover, Frank Freeway—a tall sailor-like young fellow of twenty-six or seven, noble-appearing and superbly proportioned—was upon the scene to the rescue.

A momentary wrenching struggle, and Jessie was released, her would-be abductor being hurled, staggering, back to the brink of the low sandy bluff that abruptly terminated the hill on the seaward side.

"What, my darling!" cried the new-comer, regarding the Britisher with fierce resentment while gathering the young girl closer in his protecting arms; "has this villain dared to lay a hand on you? Smuggler, indeed! His secret is out at last. He commands the British press-gang that is stealing American sailors for his accursed service, not only from our ships, but from all along our defenseless coast!"

Jessie uttered a little cry of consternation, while Courtold, unabashed, gave a contemptuous laugh, and looked around him expectantly.

The next instant, however, Frank had precipitated himself upon him afresh.

There was a brief struggle, for both were brave, prodigiously muscular men, and not unevenly matched; then the treacherous sand-brink gave way, sending them, rolling and struggling furiously, to the foot of the bank, with the American in the mastering position.

At this instant, however, there was a gruff shout, and half-a-dozen British tars came rushing from the direction of the inlet in response to the signal of a few moments before.

"Be lively!" ordered Courtold, coolly regaining his feet while his minions lost no time in overpowering and securing his surprised rival.

"Jessie, they're kidnapping me!" called out Freeway, as a gag was being forced into his mouth. "Run and tell your uncle, and then spread the alarm."

But, Jessie seemed momentarily paralyzed, and at this juncture more tars made their appearance from the direction of the cottage, having old Blowlock himself and another man as captives, gagged and bound, among them.

"To the boat!" shouted Courtold, jubilantly. "And now, Jessie, my charmer," springing toward her, "I am ready for you once more."

CHAPTER II.

THE PRESS-GANG SCHOONER.

BUT Jessie had, by this time, recovered both her strength and her wits, and was up and away over the brow of the hill with a lightness and speed that must have defied pursuit.

"Never mind, Mistress Brighteyes!" growled Courtold with a muttered oath. "Better luck next time."

He then gave the necessary order, and the prisoners were forthwith lugged away to a large ship's boat, which had by this time made her appearance from her place of concealment somewhere far back in the crooked inlet, and ten minutes later all were on board the British craft.

Jessie lost no time in spreading the alarm, which was snatched up and carried like wildfire.

In less than an hour, nearly the entire population of both Quogue and Southampton, to say nothing of the smaller and more scattered settlements, were excitedly gathered on the shore.

"Thar'll be war on top o' this!" cried Seth Stratton, a brawny old shoreman, in the midst of a babel of similar comments. "It's been a-brewin' long enough, and now it shall be Free Trade an' Sailors' Rights with er vengeance. Ther Gov'ment shall be notified at onc't. Cuss thet smuggler, Courtold, anyway! I allers did suspicion him."

"Smuggler be blowed!" interposed Tom Ratchet, a young sailor, but recently returned from a long voyage to the Indies. "It's a wonder they haven't snatched us all up, one by one, as well as Frank Freeway and Captain Bob. Don't ye know an English search-ship when you see her? Ha! look there!"

Then a murmur of mingled wrath and consternation went up from the assembled shore-folk.

The great schooner, a mystery no longer, was just rounding out from the offing, and shaking out the glistening white plumage of her vast fore-and-aft sails, preparatory to her bird-like flight seaward before the freshening northeast wind.

The commonplace name on her stern-board had disappeared to give place to her true one, in which her legitimate character was becomingly emblazoned.

It was no longer as the pseudo-smuggler, Nancy Jane, but as his Britannic Majesty's war-ship Scorpion, flaunted there in rich crimson and gilt on its background of dead black, that she was already kicking up the silver heels of her foaming wake to the gaping wonderers of the shore whom she had so victimized and deluded.

Added to this that her whilom graceful, but harmless-looking, black sides were now punctuated with open port-holes, with a black-muzzled war-dog grinning from each—six on each broadside, that the brass glitter of her long chasers, bow and stern, could be plainly distinguished in the flooding June sunlight, and that at last, with an ironical dip or two and then a triumphant top-hoist, the battle flag of old England, the then real tyrant of the seas, flatteringly unfolded itself from her gaff, and the impression produced on the indignant on-lookers from the shore can be better imagined than described.

Then a simultaneous series of smoke-puffs, the roar of her sarcastic broadside salute at parting, whose iron bolts sung hurtlingly over the beholders' heads, and she was off for blue water, and doubtless fresh high-handed outrages.

"Shiver my timbers!" exclaimed Tom Ratchet, slapping his thigh with a true sailor-man's admiration; "but wouldn't she make a screaming privateer, with a letter-of-marque in her locker and the Stars and Stripes at her gaff?"

Seth Stratton grasped his hand, while others of the rough fisher and surf men—experienced

seamen nearly every one of them—gathered around them with eager and kindling faces.

"Brace up, mate!" said he. "Stranger things than thet hez chanced afore now, an' thar's the man aboard of her to bring about ther transformation, if any man in these United States kin."

"You mean Frank Freeway?"

"Who else? Is there a bolder young skipper or a truer American than our Frank the Fearless on the hull coast-line? Oh, if the Congress would only declare war, an' gi'n us the chance!"

Here there was an expectant stir among the crowd, and Smith Flannigan, mail-carrier and newsbearer-at-large, and a well-known character of Sag Harbor and Riverhead, was seen riding rapidly toward them on his dappled gray horse, dispatch-pack at his side, a flourished gazette in his right hand.

"War declared!" he roared, in his rich Irish brogue. "Congress an' the President have given the wur-rd, war-ships an' privateersairshwarm-in' out of ivery por-rt, an' from this hour it's Free Trade an' Sailors' Rights, wid death an' destruction to the British tyrants wherever found on the high says!"

This proved to be the truth.

A great enthusiastic shout went up from the throng—an echo of that which was by this time beginning to resound over the entire country, in spite of the divers sentiment as to the wisdom of the national policy thus declared, and as the hardy simple folk scattered to discuss the great event in their homes, even Jessie Heartwell was temporarily consoled for the misfortune to her lover and uncle in the general feeling of jubilation that prevailed.

"You mustn't be down-hearted, dear aunt!" she said to her relative, who had accompanied her to the beach, and was still weeping over the bad luck to her good man. "Look at me, and think of this great news. Seth Stratton couldn't have been far out of the way in his prediction. That infamous schooner must be fairly crammed with kidnapped American sailors by this time, and if gallant Frank and Uncle Bob should only manage to surprise her officers and crew—ah, think what a vengeance they could help to take upon these insolent despots of the seas!"

"Yes, yes, dearie," murmured the old dame, somewhat consoled. "Captain Frank is a bold youth, and Blowlock has still got the pith of the sea in his right arm, if his left one is nothing more than a wooden one, with an iron hook for the hand of it. But then, in the mean time, what with my poor savings an' the fisheries doubtless to soon go begging for their markets—However, the Lord's will be done, Jessie, and may Heaven prosper the right!"

In the mean time, scarcely had the Scorpion dropped her mask, so to speak, and put about for the open, before Freeway and Blowlock, who had taken due note with seaman-like intelligence of the transformation that had been effected, were ordered to appear before her commander.

The latter, Courtold, regarded them both, but the younger captive particularly, with a cynical look that curled the corners of his mouth behind his great mustache and bushy black beard.

"You first, Mr. Blowlock," said he, briskly. "You are a British sailor?"

"You're a liar!" replied old Ironhook, with a flourish of his artificial hand after his custom when especially indignant, and with the choicest oath in his nautical vocabulary. "Put that in your blasted smuggler's whistle and blow it!"

"Your heat is excusable under the circumstances," continued Courtold, good-temperedly. "Still, you have sailed in British ships in your time?"

"Of course I have, and in many another sort, you treacherous bloke of a deck-swab! But, that doesn't make an Englishman of me, and you know it."

"It answers the purpose just the same. This is his Majesty's ship-of-war Scorpion. Will you sign articles for the service?"

"See you sunk first!" with a yet more vigorous oath.

"Let him cool off a bit in the cockpit," observed Courtold, turning to a master's mate and a couple of grinning jack-tars in attendance. And old Blowlock was summarily hustled out of the cabin, and not too gently at that.

The same preliminary questions were then put to Freeway, who, however, being more politic, met them in a different mood by maintaining a contemptuous silence.

"Don't you intend to answer me?" cried the British officer, sharply.

"Not till I know you in your true character," was the composed reply.

"You have known me on shore for what I appear to you?"

"Your ship was under false colors; why not yourself likewise?"

"True," said the other, with an ugly look. "You may have better cause to dread me in my true than in my fictitious character. Besides, there is no further need of masquerading. Wait, then."

He signed to a steward, who was present, and, stepping back, disappeared with him through some rich hangings that partitioned off the rear portion of the cabin from the rest.

Even Freeway, whatever he might have anticipated, was unprepared for the transformation that had been effected when the commander of the Scorpion reappeared a few moments later.

"Lord Oldcourt!" he exclaimed. "Ah! I begin to understand."

CHAPTER III.

A BOLD PLOT.

"COURTOLD" had been but "Oldcourt" transposed, and now, the disguising beard and rough, smuggler's garb having disappeared, the schooner's master stood before his astonished captive, smooth-faced, haughty, erect, self-reliant, in all the splendor of a British naval lieutenant's perfectly-fitting uniform, gorgeous with gold lace and ornamental frogging, cocked hat under his arm, jewel-hilted sword-blade at his side.

"So, my American gamecock!" said Lord Oldcourt, smiling insolently at the effect he had produced. "Are you satisfied?"

"Yes, but no longer surprised," replied Frank, contemptuously. "The trick was worthy of a titled blackguard. A man who would repeatedly attempt to abduct an innocent girl, who frankly and avowedly despised him, could alone be found willing to do the dirty, piratical work that any self-respecting officer of any naval power in the world would consider immeasurably beneath his honor. As for the rest, your country will be held accountable not only to the United States Government, but to the Law of Nations, for these high-handed outrages of your accursed press-gang upon a people with whom you are at peace!"

"Silence, or I won't answer for myself!" thundered the lieutenant, purple with rage, and laying his hand on his sword. "Insolent!"

"Insolent yourself!" still coolly.

Lord Oldcourt brought his raging temper under control with a resolute abruptness that was one of his characteristics.

"One mistake you labor under, young man," said he, with candor and comparative calmness. "War was declared by your Government four days ago. I received authentic intelligence of the fact this morning."

"God be praised!" cried the young sailor, joyfully.

"Will you sign articles?"

"Go to the devil, your master!"

Oldcourt merely inclined his head toward the master's mate and tars, who had by this time returned, and Frank was likewise hurried away to close confinement in the cockpit.

As he was being led aft along the open deck, however, there was a slight interruption on the part of his custodian, giving him ample opportunity for a comprehensive glance, which was sufficient for his sailor's eye to take in the vessel's superb equipments more thoroughly than on being first bundled aboard.

"Broadside of six brand-new twenty-four-pounders each," was his mental comment, "and a thirty-two-pounder Long Tom fore and aft. One hundred and twenty-five tars, all able seamen, and nearly one-half of them pressed American sailors, just aching in secret to strike a blow for the Stars and Stripes, or I'm a lobsouser! And, what a wilderness of canvas, and how she just fleets away before this stiff land-breeze!"

His concluding words were an echo of those that had been evoked from old Seth Stratton's lips, while viewing the unmasked flyer from the hard Quogue beach.

"American-built, too, every spar, plank and rivet of her. Whata craft for a privateer, with the American flag at her gaff and an American crew on her muster-roll!"

He was then roughly hurried below, and was soon left in the hot, gloomy and ill-smelling confines of the cockpit, with his comrade in misfortune, Uncle Bob Blowlock, for a companion.

To add to the gloominess of their outlook, several sailors presently made their appearance, fetching them a chunk of moldy ship's bread and pannikin of water each, by way of a mid-day meal, and who also invested them each with a set of double irons, to which the prisoners submitted without a murmur.

"It's 'is ludship's orders," said one of the men, seemingly a boatswain's mate, or something of the sort, half-apologetically, and with a sailor's bluff sympathy. "But, it mayn't be fur long, yer know, if you honly hact a leetle temporizin'-like."

"Humph!" grunted Blowlock.

Frank disdained any answer, while gnawing philosophically on his hard-tack and secretly eying one of the men, who, after giving him a furtive sign, was looking at him earnestly.

"That's the truth, mates," said another of the tars, also a cockney, "the king's service is a good 'un, an' now that war's declared, there's a 'earty chance for prize-money from the American merchantmen, to say nothink o' the Frenchmen an' their hallies."

A storm of abuse from old Blowlock was his answer, and the men angrily withdrew, though not before the man already indicated had managed to throw young Freeway another encouraging sign.

"What's that the blasted deck-swabber said about war bein' declared, Frank?" growled

Uncle Bob, after exchanging some reflections, more or less gruesome, with his companion.

"Cockney guff fur Yankee gudgeons, I s'pose."

"No, but doubtless the truth," Frank replied. "The villain, Oldcourt, asserted as much to me, and with an air of real sincerity, too, for a wonder—may Satan scorch the base hound on his best galley gridiron, in case I never get a fair swing at him, cutlass in hand!"

"Well, well, well! To think of that smuggler, Courtold, and this swell lord, Oldcourt, bein' one an' the same! Though, come to think of it, we mou't have suspected it, with his on-principled pursuit of our Jessie, to say nothing of the back-foremostin' of the two names."

"True enough. Oh, if I only had suspected it!" and Frank's fine face was drawn with tense lines of anger.

"Howsomever, it's no good sputterin' over spilled soup," sighed Blowlock, stretching himself out on the hard deck as comfortably as his irons would permit. "War or no war, little good for you an' me in this pickle. A pity, too, for my old good-wife's sake, to say nothing of pretty Jessie and yourself! So I might as well take a nap while the mood is on me."

"Do so, Uncle Bob; but don't be too down-hearted," observed Frank, cheerfully. "There may be hope ahead."

"Hope!" and the tough old coastman was instantly bolt-upright and staring, though of course in a sitting position. "What do you mean, Frank?"

The latter mentioned the secret sign he had received from the sailor, who had, moreover, seemed to be an American, and thought that there might be some significance of encouragement.

So did Blowlock, for that matter; but, the long and tedious hours dragged away without any additional ray of hope.

At last, however, toward sunset, there was heard the hurrying tramp of unusual preparations on deck, followed by the roaring boom of a big gun, which, from the brassy ring of it, together with the slight quivering direction of the recoil aft, they both knew must be the letting go of the schooner's bow-chaser.

It was followed by another and yet another report, in rapid succession.

"The blasted hounds!" commented Blowlock, with a groan. "They're like enough overhauling some poor devil of a coaster, to rob her of half her crew on the lying plea of their bein' Englishers."

Presently, while the cannonading continued, the hatch softly opened, and the sailor who had given Frank the signal—a manly but secretive-looking fellow, apparently a Down-Easter—nimbly descended the ladder.

"Are you game for a blow to capture the ship?" he demanded, eying them both intently.

Their looks, no less than their words, were a sufficient affirmative.

"Look you, then, mates," continued the man, "the hour's at hand. We're sixty true blue Americans aboard—pressed men—out of a crew of a hundred and thirty, and some of the rest of 'em only half-hearted for the king, to boot. And we're thoroughly organized for the attempt, but we're in need of a capable leader, in whom we can have full confidence. My name's Knowlesby, and I'm from Marblehead. I was pressed out of a coaster, of which I was first mate, three months ago. You," looking at young Freeway, "I take it from what was whispered when the pair of you were tumbled aboard, are Captain Frank Freeway, of Sag Harbor, the Hamptons and thereabouts?"

Frank nodded.

"The same what brought in the big West Indian last September equinox, after the pilot had given her up for a goner?"

"Yes," with becoming modesty.

"Naval experience, too, they say?"

"Was a boy with the French at Trafalgar and the battle of the Nile, and have served in our own navy as both boatswain's mate and gunner's assistant."

"Good! Will you lead us?"

"For life or death!"

The man opened a bundle which he had brought down with him, and which proved to contain two suits of British tar regulation costumes, pumps and tarpaulins inclusive, and a couple of slender, keen-edged files.

Meantime the cannonading, together with the hurried tramping over the deck, continued.

"Fall to on the irons," resumed Knowlesby, of Marblehead. "And while you're at it I'll give you a point or two of our plot."

CHAPTER IV.

FOR LIFE OR DEATH.

THERE was small need of a second bidding for the prisoners to obey this welcome injunction.

"Is there no danger of our being interrupted?" demanded Frank, while doing his best with the file.

"None," was the reply. "Everybody is too busy to think of us—all but the Americans, and they are thinking of nothing else."

"What's the present excitement? A Yankee merchantman being overhauled?"

"Better than that, mate."

"What is it?"

"An armed American brig, that is showing fight."

"Glory to God!" cried Uncle Bob, who could be no less devout than profane on occasion.

"It is to be our opportunity, if we're ever to have one," continued Knowlesby. "The brig will be no match for the schooner, but if she will only stand her off so as to compel an attempt at boarding her—well, we must make it our opportunity."

"Who organized this plot?"

"I did."

"Bravo! Well, how do you stand now for the attempt?"

"Many of our men have done forced duty so long and well as to be trusted equally with the genuine Britishers."

"Some of the latter, too, as I hinted, are those—chiefly Irishmen and Canadians—who have but small liking for the service."

"The boatswain and gunner, Irishmen both, are, in fact, unequivocally in our plot. Through their direction, the arms-room and magazine are already both under guard of our friends. As soon as you've shed those irons, you're both to slip on deck with me, trusting to the excitement of this sea-chase for escaping special scrutiny on the part of the skipper or Midshipman Garson, his second in command—both of 'em keen-sighted as hawks. Your elderly companion here—"

"Uncle Bob Blowlock, Mr. Knowlesby," interrupted Frank, introductorily.

"Thank you. Well, Mr. Blowlock will have to keep his jacket-sleeve well down over that iron hook on the stump of his arm yonder, as an extra precaution."

"Trust to the Great Jehovah and me for that, mate," said Uncle Bob, sententiously, and working furiously at his file, with a wrist and one ankle already free. "Give me but a hatchet or a belayin'-pin for my right hand, when the word is sung out, and this iron hook that answers for my left fin will take keel of itself. I fit into the War for Independence, I did, besides having clasped flippers with General La Fayette and Admiril John Paul Jones, the Pride of the Waves in my time—though on different occasions," he added, by way of saving clause.

"Pray proceed, Mr. Knowlesby," observed Frank, a little impatiently.

"There isn't much more to say," continued the man from Marblehead. "Once among our men, you'll be looked upon as their natural leader. They know what is going on, and have got their cue from me."

"You'll find our main body at quarters well forward on the port side. I will be with the smaller band at the entrance to the magazine and arms-room."

"I thought it best to wait till Lord Oldcourt leads his party of boarders in person, none but native Englishmen ever being chosen for that duty, and then sailing into them in the rear, as a first stroke. But, you must use your own judgment in giving the signal for attack."

"A capital plan!" declared young Freeway. "I'll cheerfully undertake the command if you so say."

"I do so say," replied Knowlesby, earnestly.

"All of us do."

"One moment. Why don't you undertake it yourself?"

"I don't feel myself fit for a first command in such an undertaking."

"How did you chance to hit upon me?"

"There are several Long Island men among us—old men-o'-war's-men every one of 'em—Jack Jigsby and Paul Ferris."

"Aha, I know them well. Old shipmates of mine, though much older than I."

"They've been quietly blowing your trumpet, as a fine sailor and a fighting man, used to important commands, ever since they saw you put aboard this morning. You'll find the men ripe for you to a man."

"Good, and many thanks to old shipmates Jigsby and Ferris, as well as yourself!"

As Frank Freeway spoke, the last of his shackles fell asunder, and he rose to his feet grasping the duds that had been brought for him.

At this moment, however, there was a noise at the hatchway overhead.

Knowlesby had just time to skulk out of sight, and Frank to resume his half-recumbent posture, when the boatswain's mate and two or three others peered down through the open hatch.

"Allo down there!" called out the petty officer.

"Hallo yourself?" gruffly responded Blowlock, in response to a nudge from Frank's elbow.

"Is Knowlesby with you there?"

"Who in thunder's Knowlesby?" cried Captain Bob again.

"Wat were you-'uns scrapin' them hiron's with a minute ago?"

"Scrapin' fer grease to butter these bang-up hot muffins you brought us with."

"Ere now, you blarsted hold reprobate, none o' your himperence to a king's officer!"

"Come an' see fer yourself, then, if yer ain't content."

At the same instant, old Blowlock, by a dex-

terous twist of the wrists, natural and artificial, also shed his last manacles, and was ready for business.

"That I will!" was the response, with an angry oath.

And then the boatswain's mate and three jack-tars, all armed with cutlasses and pistols, came hurrying down the ladder, one after another.

Scarcely had the former touched the deck, however, before he was knocked senseless by a fist-blow behind the ear, dealt by Knowlesby.

The next man following stumbled on the lowermost round, and was summarily brained by old Blowlock fetching him a tremendous blow, bludgeon-wise, with his iron-shod artificial arm before he could recover.

At the same instant Frank, by a lightning-like exertion of his great strength, tore the entire ladder from its fastenings, and brought the two remaining intruders down upon the deck with stunning force.

"Harpoons an' fishbait!" cried Uncle Bob; "purty lively work even fer Yankee sailors. But then," with a flourish of his hook-armed stump, "I never yet fetched a feller a fair crack with old Ironhook here but what it was good-by or Stand-from-under to Mr. Brains onderneath."

"You've really killed this man," said Frank, regretfully, after a brief examination of Captain Bob's victim, and this was the truth.

"He orter stood from under," observed Blowlock, apologetically scratching his head with the point of his arm-hook, after which he uncereimoniously appropriated the dead man's belt and weapons.

Meanwhile, the boatswain's mate, having already shown signs of returning consciousness, Knowlesby made sure of him for the time being by sitting on his head, while likewise relieving him of his arms.

One of the men who had come down with the ladder was also found to be past praying for, with a broken neck, while the other was still in a dazed condition.

Something had rattled loudly in the general crash—which proved to be an extra pair of sets of double irons, which one of the men had been carrying, doubtless with the intention of remanaging the prisoners, should they be found to have tampered materially with their original shackles.

These new irons were at once utilized by securing the boatswain's mate and his living companion, to which were speedily added effectual gags of Blowlock's special contrivance.

"Come now!" urged Knowlesby, somewhat anxiously; "lose no more time, mates, in jumping into your duds, while I plant this ladder again. It's a godsend if the crash of its fall may not have attracted attention from on deck."

"No danger of that, I think," observed Frank, busily engaged. "The big gun fortunately went off at the same instant. Listen to the tramping up yonder. They must have the brig pretty snug under their quarter by this time."

In a few moments the transformation was complete; then, duly attired and weaponed as British jack-tars, the late prisoners of the cockpit cautiously followed their deliverer up the replanted ladder, leaving the helpless pair and their dead companions in their stead.

Frank Freeway drew in a long, exultant breath of the strong salt air as the trio finally emerged on deck.

The greatest bustle and confusion prevailed, and it was now for life or for death in the bold plot that was on foot.

CHAPTER V.

ANOTHER TRANSFORMATION.

As previously advised by Knowlesby, Frank and Blowlock managed to mingle with the main body of the pressed men drawn up at quarters forward, without evoking any special scrutiny on the part of Oldcourt and his second in command, who were busy enough directing matters from the quarter-deck.

As they did so, Frank was especially regarded with an extraordinary amount of furtive curiosity, his noble, dauntless bearing and superb physique at once creating a decided impression in his favor.

He cautiously gripped his old shipmates, Jigsby and Ferris, by the hand, and forthwith began to circulate among the conspirators.

The brig, already badly damaged in her upper works by the schooner's sharp practice with her bow-chaser, though replying spiritedly enough with the eighteen-pounders she carried, was by this time almost within hail, the Scorpion swooping down on her, wing and wing, like a great destroying eagle of the deep.

Her decks were black with men, however, and, with the Stars and Stripes displayed, she seemed in no mood of submitting tamely to the arrogant demands of her more powerful foe.

"What ship is that?" presently roared Oldcourt, who was a thorough sailor, and seemed to fairly glory in such a pass as this.

"Sussex, merchantman of Bosting," breezily responded the brig's skipper—a long-built, an-

gular individual, as near as he could be made out—with a distinct twang of down-East nasality. "What craft is that?"

"His Britannic Majesty's ship-of-war Scorpion. Strike your flag, or we'll sink you!"

"Sink us, and be hanged to you, you bloody pirate!" came the defiant reply.

But this, which Oldcourt might quickly have done with his superior armament, was by no means his intention, since the brig was heavily laden, and might prove a valuable prize.

"Where are you from?" he accordingly next bawled out, as the schooner continued to swoop down upon her prospective victim.

"Rio," was the laconic response.

"If you're a merchantman, why are you armed?"

"Fer jist sech pirates as you, you sea sucker!"

"Lie to, or we'll have you aboard."

"Look here, Mr. Britisher."

"Well?"

"No good searchin' us. We haven't a British subject aboard of us."

"Don't want to search, but to make you a prize. War was declared four days ago."

"Don't believe it!"

The vessels were now within biscuit toss, the sea, which was by no means rough, being favorable for a boarding attempt, gunwale to gunwale.

"Strike that flag!"

"Go to blazes!"

"Boarders aft!" shouted Oldcourt, springing down from the poop, sword in hand. "Mr. Crumly," to his second in command, a heavy-set passed midshipman of uncertain age and rather brutal aspect, "wear in, and then look to the grapplings. Boatswain, muster aft!"

A thrill of joy ran through the conspirators as the men selected for the boarding attempt, fully fifty in number, and all of them ultra Englishmen, went hurrying aft and to starboard in response to the order, the boatswain at their head, for everything was falling in line with their secret purpose.

Apparently carelessly lounging here and there, Frank Freeway kept his men well in hand, with a whispered injunction at this point or that, while Knowlesby was no less industrious with his knot of fifteen or twenty at the arms-room entrance amidships.

"It's a go!" chuckled Blowlock, under his breath. "Blind me dead if it ain't a bloody go!"

At this juncture the sides of the two vessels swung lightly together, the grapnels were out, making fast, and a battle cheer burst from the jack tars at their titled commander's back, eager for the signal.

It was given, and then, the brig's side being a good deal the higher, the tars swarmed up, with another deep-throated British cheer, cutlass, hatchet, boarding pike or pistol in hand.

But, the brig's men, though outnumbered, were defending their rail with true grit, and in the momentary melee that ensued, Oldcourt and their slab-sided skipper were having it out hand-to-hand and singly, though the latter was armed only with a belaying-pin, as against the other's flashing long sword, wielded with an expert fencer's skill.

Frank Freeway threw a swift, comprehensive glance over his immediate followers, while exchanging a sign with Knowlesby.

The moment seemed ripe.

"Forward to arms-room for arming!" shouted the midshipman, heading the reserve watch of true-blue Englishmen, who had not yet been apportioned their weapons, in a solid body to the door of the magazine, where Knowlesby and his conspirators were apparently innocently on guard.

"Now!" yelled Freeway, discharging his pistol, and bringing down the boatswain, by way of emphasis.

Simultaneously, Knowlesby emptied their fire-arms into the unarmed advancing squad, and, with a ringing cheer for the Stars and Stripes, Frank and the main body of the discontents charged the boarders in the rear!

The surprise was all but perfect. The brig's men, instantly comprehending the turn of affairs in their favor, redoubled their defensive fight, while the astounded boarding tars, finding themselves thus bloodily beset in the rear, were immediately infused with panic.

Several were shot, cut or beaten down before they could even turn in their tracks to face the unexpected foe. Others threw down their arms and fled, running up into the rigging, crouching down by the scuppers, or even jumping into the sea.

British sailors, however, are true bulldogs on the average; so the majority still stood by their leader, who was a gamecock pure and simple, and there was still a fighting chance left them.

"Kill that man—strike him dead!" roared his lordship, pausing in his sword-play, with a knot of his best men all but surrounding him, to point furiously at his rival, who was covering himself with glory in the van of the rear attack. "Five hundred pounds for his body, dead or alive!"

Frank burst into a fierce laugh.

"Is that all I am worth to your lordship?" he

sneered. "Save your money by essaying the job yourself, you woman-thief!"

With that he shouldered his way through the press, striking right and left, and the next instant, amid a roar of voices like that of an angry sea, he was engaging the British commander, hand to hand.

"Fair play's a jewel!" bellowed old Blowlock, close at his heels. "Skewer the gilt-edged swell, Frank! Disembowel him!"

As he spoke he brought an intercepting tar to the deck with a crack on the crown from his terrible iron hook, while twirling a marline-spike in his right hand with scarcely less effect as he shouted:

"Hurrah for the Stars and Stripes! Swoop 'em in, my hearties."

In a more deliberate encounter, with wider room, Lord Oldcourt's superior swordsmanship must have had all the best of the single combat, but, hampered and hemmed in as they both were, Frank's alertness and powerful if less skillful play with his shorter but heavier blade was a sufficient offset.

"Yankee mudsill!" fumed Oldcourt, with a flashing tierce-thrust, which, however, was successfully parried. "You are fighting an English gentleman!"

"Successful in love, successful in war, my lord," quoth Frank from the old saw, with a light laugh. "Hurrah for the United States!"

Then he caught another thrust in the sleeve of his jacket, breaking the finely-tempered blade short off by a dexterous twist, and brought his antagonist, disarmed, to his knees with a fierce hilt-blow in the throat, ending the fight and the battle, with a complete victory for the Americans!

"Lord Oldcourt," said Frank Freeway, an hour or so later, and with not a little irony in his tone, "your big schooner seems to have been undergoing yet another transformation. What do you think of her as she stands now?"

They were standing on the poop-deck of the American brig at the time.

The schooner was heaved-to, softly rocking on the sunset-tinged waters a short distance away, the Stars and Stripes streaming from her gaff, and a new name, destined to become the terror of the seas—the "SEA WRAITH"—emblazoned in huge freshly-painted letters on her stern-board.

CHAPTER VI.

PRIVATEER, AHOY.

LORD OLD COURT scowled, and vouchsafed not a word in reply, though his sense of humiliation was bitter and crashing in the extreme.

"It really seems to me, my lord," continued the young commander, still smilingly, and with his eyes fixed on the beautiful vessel, "that you ought to have an opinion here. As a disguised smuggler for the piratical purposes of the base British press-gang, she may have been something of a success. In her brief new character of a British man-of-war, she was unquestionably less fortunate. But how will she answer as a bold privateer, under yonder ensign, and with that suggestive name on her stern-board?"

Seething with impotent inner fury, the British lord and naval lieutenant bit his lip, and still remained silent.

Frank could not yet abstain from his bantering, though it was in him to be generous in his hour of victory.

"Baltimore-built, if I mistake not, my lord?" he continued, politely.

Lord Oldcourt threw away the stump of the cheroot he was smoking, and setting his jaws hard, thrust his hands deep into his trousers-pockets.

"Yes, Mr. Freeway," he at last responded, gloomily, "I believe so."

"A good sailer, eh?"

Even in his humiliation, the defeated commander's sailorly admiration for the noble schooner in whose command he had gloried till of late was momentarily aroused.

"There are none better on blue water," he grudgingly replied. "She can run away from any other skimmer ever built, and play hide and seek with the navies of the world, I am sure."

"Aha, a rare prize! And doubtless well provisioned and ammunitioned?"

"For a year's cruise, if necessary," and then Lord Oldcourt turned away.

But the plucky slab-sided skipper of the brig, whose name was Topham, was also present at this interview, his arm in a sling from one of his lordship's rapier-thrusts, and he took a keenly malicious pleasure in the Britisher's disgrace.

"But that's sayin' nothin' about this tarnation squirt's descent upon our coast-line, to say nothin' of his brutal s'arch of our ships," he suddenly cried, facing Frank with indignation that would have been comical under other circumstances. "You say I'm to kerry your prisoners into port, Captain Freeway. Wal, then, this gold-laced sea-hound 'll presently swing from my main yard-arm on my own responsibility."

Lord Oldcourt abruptly wheeled, regarding them both with a slightly paling cheek, but Frank quieted him with a gesture.

"You'll do nothing of the sort, Captain Topham, or it will be at your peril!" warned the young commander, sternly.

"Bobstays an' braces! Why won't I!" yelled the Downeaster. "This gold-fastened clam-digger stuck me with his toastin'-fork, besides batterin' my brig. I'll have my revenge, I swow I will!"

And he fairly capered on the deck.

"All in war, that," Frank calmly returned.

"But it was before the war was declared thet his infernal s'arch-gangs an' press-gangs was to work! Holy Mackerel! eff I only thunk as heow—"

"No matter, Captain Topham," interrupted young Freeway, decisively. "Our Government will deal with your chief prisoner in that particular. But for my brave followers and myself, you yourself would be his prize, instead of as it is. You have my decision as to the prisoners, and I will bear you company far enough to be assured that none are maltreated."

Oldcourt's eyes gave a hopeful flash.

There would be still a chance for his escape then! With his family influence with the admiralty, which was great, he might speedily secure a more powerful ship than the ex-Scorpion; and then there was the further chance of his being able to swoop down on Quogue Beach and carry off Jessie Heartwell before her lover could secure his letter-of-marque credentials from his Government, without the possession of which he would scarcely venture upon even the preliminaries of a privateering cruise.

But in this his lordship was somewhat mistaken, as the event proved.

The Yankee skipper was finally induced to view affairs in a somewhat less lurid light, and, Frank having returned to the schooner, the vessels presently parted company, the brig with all the prisoners on board, though the newly-fledged privateer continued to keep her in sight until well up in the Lower Bay of New York, where British cruisers were supposed to be sufficiently plentiful to make matters interesting.

Before this, however, when the young commander was coldly making his adieux to his chief prisoner, in the cabin of the Sussex, and without further allusion to the latter's defeat, or to their past unpleasant relations, a slight incident occurred which was destined to have a certain effect on Frank's futures.

"Sir," said the defeated Briton, who had for some time been regarding the young man with increased respectfulness, real or assumed, and an odd change of general demeanor, "I have been remarking a signet ring of peculiar design that you wear."

"It is a family heirloom," replied Frank, indifferently.

"An heirloom? Would you kindly let me examine it. I am something of a connoisseur in antique ornaments, as that seems to be."

The ring had often excited comment before, and Frank thought nothing of acceding to the request, while turning his eyes upon a sea-chart spread out near at hand.

Had he looked up, however, he might have been interested to perceive a look of astonishment, almost of terror, come over Lord Oldcourt as he scrutinized the ring.

The latter's device was a baronial crest, and, even apart from its antiquity, it seemed to be valuable.

As it was, Oldcourt returned it to the young man, with a few insignificant words, and the latter thought no more of the incident.

The capture of the schooner had taken place at a point about eighty miles due east of Sandy Hook.

It had cost the enemy sixteen men, killed and wounded, and fifty prisoners.

Others of the original crew, chiefly Irishmen and Canadians, had joined hands with the Americans, who were thus enabled to start their enterprise with a crew of seventy men, the majority of them experienced men-of-war's-men, most of the remainder theretofore able seamen in the merchant service.

This left the schooner somewhat short-handed for the best fighting purposes, but could be remedied later on.

Captain Frank had been unanimously elected commander, and never had a more perfectly appointed privateer been found ready made to hand or more fortunately won.

The name had been selected by her young commander in bold avowal of the system of reprisal that he intended to wreak upon the enemy's marine, as an offset to his long series of arrogant and high-handed outrages, on sea and shore.

After following the Sussex to within a few miles of Sandy Hook, a large frigate, evidently a Britisher, was seen bearing down from seaward, at sunrise of the following morning.

The Sea Wraith was accordingly put about to the southeast, evading the leviathan with an alacrity that was a sufficient test of her magnificent sailing qualities.

He explained to his followers that his object was to make a brief preliminary cruise before demanding a letter-of-marque commission from the authorities at Washington.

Then it was his private intention, as was

known at least to Uncle Bob Blowlock, whom he had appointed his boatswain, to visit Quogue at the first opportunity, to assure himself of Jessie Heartwell's continued safety, and to attend to some affairs of his own at Sag Harbor, where his mother lived.

It was a risky thing, this preliminary cruise, without papers or other legitimized credentials, rendering all on board liable to hanging for piracy in case of capture, but it opened auspiciously enough.

At sunset of that second day a sail was sighted, which proved to be a large British store-ship from Jamaica, richly cargoes and short-handed.

She was speedily made a bloodless prize, and sent off to Boston in charge of a prize-crew.

Greatly elated with this initial success, the young commander early sought his cabin, after leaving the deck in charge of Knowlesby, whom he had appointed his first mate, and slept soundly.

At midnight, however, he was awakened by Knowlesby with the report that a large, fleet vessel, perhaps a British brig-of-war, was bearing down from the north, seemingly with beligerent intentions.

"Good!" cried Captain Freeway, springing lightly from his bunk. "A real fight is what we are looking for to start us on our wraith career. I'll be with you on deck in ten minutes, Knowlesby. As you are passing out please send Kelly, my steward, with a glass of milk-punch."

Kelly made his appearance almost instantly with the desired refreshment, and then insisted on assisting his young master with his toilet, such as it was.

While doing so, the man suddenly exclaimed: "Heavens, sir! you're wearin' the long-lost heirloom of the Oldcourt barony!"

CHAPTER VII.

BIG GUNS.

THIS Kelly was a shrewd, honest-appearing Irishman, who had been found serving Lord Oldcourt in the capacity of personal steward and valet, and whom Frank, though with no experience in such a luxury, had engaged in a similar capacity at the man's earnest solicitation.

Instantly now Frank's thoughts recurred to the interest that Lord Oldcourt had manifested in his ring.

"What do you refer to?" he demanded, a little sharply. "Surely not to my signet-ring?"

"Begorra, sir! that and nothing else!" replied Kelly, with unusual earnestness. "Oid' have remarked it befoor had I seen it off av your Honor's hand."

Frank had briefly laid aside the ring to wash his hands.

"It must be the great ring av the Oldcoorts, missin' this past century an' more. There is the crist!"

"I may talk with you of this at another time," said the young commander, dissembling his newly-aroused curiosity, and he went on deck.

It was a superb night, with a light wind from the northwest, and moonlight almost as bright as day.

"What do you make of her, sir?" inquired Knowlesby, passing his superior a telescope.

The brig was by this time about four miles away, coming down under a full press, while the privateer was lazily holding her own under less than two-thirds her possible spread.

"A Britisher, and a war-ship, I think, without a doubt," replied Frank, quite gleefully, while leveling the glass. "However, call Uncle Bob aft. He has the keenest sea-eyes for determining the cut of a stranger's jib that I ever met, with a single exception—and that is old Seth Stratton, of Quogue Village."

Uncle Bob accordingly came stumping aft with not a little self-importance on being summoned, and, shifting his huge quid of tobacco from one cheek to the other, at once brought the proffered glass to bear by propping it at the end of his iron-hook in a decidedly unique manner.

"A twenty-gunner, an' British, every plank of her, or I'm a canary-bird!" was his decision, roared out at the top of his husky voice, like the snorting of a porpoise or the booming of a cannonade. "Now, my advice to yer, Cap'n Frank, is jest to luff-to a bit in ther wind, drum all hands to quarters, git every pop-gun in apple order, an' then, when the bloated big war-tub yonder comes a leetle closer, sort o' unsuspecting-like, yer know, to—"

"That will do, boatswain," interposed Frank, with a rather studied coldness which he had already found advisable in order to curb Uncle Bob's exuberant familiarity. "Thank you for your judgment, but now you can return to your duty."

The old fellow did so, amid the grins of some of the crew, who had sized up his eccentricities, but not without scratching his head with his arm-hook, while muttering something about the young skipper might trim down some of his fine airs to advantage, or he might not be a nephew-in-law in the Blowlock family-circle so speedily as he anticipated.

"Take a clew in the mainsail," ordered Frank,

turning to his mate, "and let the brig draw in on us. If she then shows her teeth, we can show her what we are made of," and his bold eyes sparkled at the possibility of conquering such a superb prize, as the initial battle-stroke in his privateering career.

The order was obeyed, the brig creeping slowly down upon her graceful, low-hulled antagonist as the latter gradually fell off in her speed.

But as this was tedious work, Frank left a few orders with his mate, and then, mindful of Kelly's strange words, returned to his cabin, where he was fortunate enough to find the steward busying himself about the saloon just as if it were midday in lieu of the middle of night.

"O' niver take me rest, sir, when a say-foght is in the wind," explained the man, half-apologetically. "It's a way av me own."

"A good enough custom," observed the young skipper, seating himself thoughtfully at the table. "Bring me another milk punch, and you can make one for yourself, if you choose. I want to have a few words with you, Kelly."

"Ay, ay, sir!" and the steward skipped toward the lockers with no little alacrity.

"Now," continued Frank, when the bumper was set before him, "I want you to tell me something more of your relations with Lord Oldcourt."

"W'u'd your Honor permit me first to dhrink your Honor's health?" inquired Kelly, scratching his foot while raising his glass.

"Go ahead, and drink hearty."

Kelly downed his bumper with an appreciative gusto.

"O' I've been a retainer, sir, av the owld Oldcourt family from me airly boyhood," he then began, with considerable affability. "Bethter still, so was me father, me grandfather an' me great-grandfather befor me."

"Odd, then, that you should quit the service so willingly," commented Freeway.

A stern look suddenly appeared in the steward's good-humored face.

"It was because of the prisent lord, sir," he explained, a little huskily. "O' had a swate-heart, sir—as purty a colleen as could be found in all Dooblin town. An' this not so long ago, aither."

"Yes, yes," impatiently. "But what has that to do with the Oldcourt family?"

"This Lord Lionel, sir," in a choking voice—"he robbed me av the gur-rl, and bruk me own heart and hers. O' d' have kilt him," wildly, "wid the opporchunity!"

"Say no more of this," interposed the young skipper in a much kinder tone. "Is the Oldcourt an Irish or English family, then?"

"Both, sir, wid vast estates in both counthries, though the castle seat is just outside o' Dooblin town."

"Humph! And now about this ring of mine? What did you mean by referring to it as you did?"

"W'u'd your Honor let me take a likelier squint at it?"

The ring was placed in his hand.

"It's the same," exclaimed Kelly, returning the signet, after a close scrutiny. "O' d' swear to it from me own family tradition respecting it. Sure, sir, have ye then some av the blue blood av the Oldcourts in your own veins?"

"Not that I am aware of, and I trust not. Now explain."

"A younger branch is now in possession, sir. Lord Talbot, the ildest son av owld Lord Oldcourt, mysteriously disappeared thray ginérations, or nigh onto a century ago. His throe lineal male descendent, if now living, wid the proofs, w'u'd inherit both the toitle an' the estates, to the exclusion of Lord Lionel. Now if your Honor moight only prove to be that fortunate descendent—"

Here Frank interrupted him with a careless laugh, as the booming of big guns was heard in the distance, and he forthwith hurried again on deck.

The great brig was now less than three miles away, her battle-cross standard of St. George showing distinctly in the clear moonlight.

She had just fired a broadside as a signal for the schooner to come to and give an account of herself.

"Oho!" chuckled the young commander, rubbing his hands; and then he called out to his mate: "What iron is she throwing, Mr. Knowlesby?"

"Twenty-fours, sir," was the response, "as near as I can judge, and all short of us, so far."

"Good! Order up the colors, and then call the gunner aft, to unlimber. I'm curious to see this stern-chaser of ours talk and act."

The stand of colors had been obtained of the skipper of the Sussex.

A moment later the glorious Stars and Stripes were streaming defiantly from the Sea Wraith's gaff, amid a cheer from her crew, that swept out over the lovely moonlit waters with a ringing echo.

Then the man who had been appointed gunner came aft, with an assistant, and proceeded to unlimber the stern-chaser, a magnificent brass thirty-two-pounder of extra length and weight. He was a gigantic Nova Scotia Frenchman,

of much experience in naval gunnery, according to report, and with a most wholesome hatred of England and Englishmen.

The first shot from the chaser was a brilliant success, hulling the war-ship neatly, and sending up a shower of splinters from her port bow.

"Good shot!" cried Frank, while the crew burst into another cheer. "Try it again, Mr. Beaumanoir."

CHAPTER VIII.

ALL BY MOONLIGHT.

THE Acadian gunner bowed politely in response, and then made a second essay with the Long Tom, and even with better success than the first.

This time he sighted for the enemy's upper works, and her foretopgallant-mast was seen to come down with a rush, amid a tangling of wrecked canvas and cordage.

"Hooray fer our side!" suddenly whooped out Uncle Bob Blowlock, altogether irrepressible at this exciting juncture. "Back-slush and bilgewater! but that was a doughnut! Give her blazes, sonny, give her blazes!" And then, amid the roaring laughter of the crew, he clapped his boatswain's whistle to his lips, and blew on it till his puffed red cheeks seemed nigh to bursting, while capering about in a regular hornpipe on his sturdy old pins.

Frank could afford to be indulgent under the circumstances, and only turned to Knowlesby with a light laugh.

Bolt after bolt was hurled at the Britisher, from that one terrible gun, with similar or almost equal effect, while all of the Briton's lighter-weight shots fell much short in return.

At last, as the interval continued to lessen, for the Wraith had taken in yet more sail for this purpose, a double-shot from the incomparable Long Tom was seen to rake the brig's deck fore and aft, apparently with awful effect.

There was a flash, followed by a reverberating explosion from her midships, indicating that her magazine might have blown up; then her entire towering mainmast was seen to totter and go by the board, making her little better than a dismantled wreck upon the sea, though her men could be seen working like beavers at clearing away the wreck and cumbering raffle of the great spar as it trailed deep in the water over her port rail, bringing her totally and helplessly to a stand-still.

A wild, fierce cheer rose from the deck of the privateer.

"It'll be America's turn fer s'arch-warrants at last!" bellowed old Blowlock afresh, piping his whistle and waving his hat. "Gosh all hemlock! but they're beginnin' to know how it is themselves."

"She's silenced, sir," announced Knowlesby, telescope to eye, "though she still flies her flag."

"We'll wear in on her," replied the young commander, joyfully, "and try our broadsides on her. Good Lord! but what a wonder this schooner of ours is, Knowlesby!"

"I should say so, sir," replied the mate, giving the intimidated orders. "With her sailing powers and her guns, she ought to keep the best double-decker afloat at arm's-length, and knock her to bits, piecemeal, while doing it. Oh, she's a Hector!"

All sail was at once made on the schooner as she came about in the light but sufficient wind, with a parting shot from the Long Tom in effecting the maneuver, and then Beaumanoir, the towering master-gunner, hurried forward to look to the bow gun and the broadsides.

Lightly as a bird the superb craft wore in upon her bulky foe, on this or that short-tack with almost as much ease in the wind's teeth as before it, and seemingly able to flit all around her enemy at will, like the veriest witch of the waves.

Then crash went her bow-chaser, proving itself no less effective than the Long Tom, as the enemy's bowsprit flew into splinters.

Then, soon, the starboard broadside of six twenty-fours was delivered at short range with heavy effect, the counter-broadside which it elicited at last in response going wide of its mark by reason of the comparatively helpless and out of headway condition of the brig.

"What ship is that?" shouted Captain Frank, when within easy hail.

The officers could be distinctly seen grouped in the moonlight on the enemy's high poop, while the majority of her men forward and amidships seemed to be sullenly at work clearing decks and attending to wounded men.

"His Britannic Majesty's brig-of-war Boreas," was shouted in response. "What craft is that?"

"His Atlantic Majesty's American privateer Sea Wraith," was the humorous return information. "Do you surrender?"

Something very like a stream of imprecations came in reply, and then, the brig having succeeded in slowly coming about, there was a defiant but ineffective volley from her unused broadside.

"Wear in yet nearer, and give her a settler!" roared the young privateersman, indignantly. "That fellow is but a fighting hen that doesn't know when her comb is cut!"

The order was obeyed, the schooner answering the least turn of her wheel as if by magic.

Now it was the bow gun, then the stern chaser, and then yet another broadside, that poured its shot into the enemy at scarcely more than six cable-lengths, and finally the British brig, now as helpless as a hulk, was seen to be on fire amidships, a great jagged hole in the deck indicating where the magazine had been blown out of her.

"Do you surrender?" again the Privateer Prince demanded.

"Yes!" was the sullen response.

"Strike your cursed flag, then, or we'll sink you!"

This was done at last, the flag having been transferred to the fore-rigging at the fall of the mainmast, and the victory was an accepted fact.

All this by moonlight, though by this time there were plenty of signs of the dawning day streaking the rapidly clouding eastern sky.

Frank himself boarded the prize, and took formal possession of her at sunrise.

She proved a magnificent one, brand-new, Glasgow-built, with eighteen guns, and a ship's company of two hundred, though fully a third of the latter had been killed or disabled, mainly by the explosion of the magazine.

The vessel itself was in a sadly battered condition, though quite susceptible to repairs, work upon which was at once ordered.

"You might have given in sooner, sir, with advantage to both your ship and your men," observed the Privateer Prince to the defeated Briton, while the work of repairs was under way.

The latter was a typical English naval officer, a lieutenant-commander, haughty and overbearing, who stood, after having given up his sword, sullenly among his subordinate officers, several of whom had been slightly wounded.

"What! to a blasted privateer?" was the angry response. "It was bad enough as it was."

"Still, it came about," observed Frank, good-humoredly.

"Allow me to ask, sir," continued the defeated officer, "if you are sailing under a commission of reprisal?"

"Not yet. We haven't had time to procure our credentials."

The Englishman stamped his foot, and was overheard to mutter something about the shame of giving in to a man who fought with a rope around his neck, but the young commander abstained from any retort.

The Englishmen finally consenting to take a more philosophical view of their misfortune, he obliged them with a brief account of the way in which the privateer had undergone her transformation.

"What!" cried the lieutenant-commander, while his subordinates seemed no less surprised; "your schooner yonder was then the Scorpion originally?"

Frank nodded.

"No wonder you overcame us," growled the Englishman. "She was the witch of our navy—simply invincible in any wind."

Here one of the prize-crew already in charge of the brig, came up and respectfully touched his hat to young Freeway.

"Two sail signaled to the nor'west, sir," he reported.

Frank swept the quarter indicated with his glass, and then looked inquiringly to his high-placed prisoners.

The young man's sailorly frankness and magnanimity had evidently won upon the defeated commander, in spite of the latter's embittered thoughts over his misfortunes.

"They're doubtless the transports," he blurted out, desperately, "that we were convoying when we were fools enough to give chase to your infernal witch-craft."

"Boat out!" exclaimed Captain Frank, energetically. "The Wraith's game-bag is a big one, and we might as well bag the lesser as the nobler game."

Then, after some conversation with the English lieutenant respecting Lord Oldcourt, with whom the former was well acquainted, he returned to the schooner, and lost no time in putting about for the purpose of scooping in the fresh prizes in prospect.

Lord Oldcourt was found to be very unpopular among his brother naval officers, chiefly, it would seem, on account of his arrogance of bearing and his favor with the admiralty through his high family interest, to the exclusion of more deserving veterans in the line of promotion, though it was reluctantly admitted that he was both a capable seaman and a brave man.

Frank, moreover, obtained certain hints as to his lordship's possible plans for the future, in the event of his making his escape from the Sussex, which increased his anxiety not a little on Jessie's account.

He could not as yet, however, think of altering his plan for a preliminary cruise, so important did he feel it to make his demand for a commission of reprisal at the earliest opportunity and with becoming brilliancy.

But he was destined to a partial disappointment on the present occasion, inasmuch as a

heavy fog sprung up, so that but one of the prospective transports was secured, the other succeeding in making her escape.

CHAPTER IX. GLORY.

THE vessel secured, however, was a fine full-rigged ship, though in ballast, and with but a sparse crew on board—a valuable prize. She might have been more welcome if gunwale-deep with costly stores, or crammed with troops.

The fog clearing away finally before a stiff northwesterly breeze, both captures were headed away under competent prize-crews for Baltimore, as being the most available port, the brig under jury masts and with the prisoners aboard.

The Sea Wraith accompanied them as far as the mouth of the Chesapeake and then put away in pursuit of several sail that were sighted to the southeast.

This was on the second morning after the fight with the Boreas. The strangers, however, proved to be three powerful British frigates, and, as a brief but severe storm sprung up soon after their character was determined, the Privateer Prince put away to seaward, on the principle that prudence was decidedly the better part of valor on occasion, and easily succeeded in evading them by the incomparable sailing of the beautiful Wraith.

The storm carried her far away to the eastward before it subsided, and, not to burden the reader with unimportant details, bad weather continuing at intervals, she was beaten about for a week or more, with varying fortunes, during which she made three prizes—one of which was a large Jamaican, with a most valuable cargo of sugar, coffee and Cuban tobacco, the others being smaller and of less importance.

The privateer finally set sail for Baltimore, with her trio of fresh-netted game, arriving there safely without further adventure, on the Fourth of July.

It was a fit addition to the celebrations of the glorious day.

All her prizes had safely reached port, spreading the renown of her achievements throughout the entire seaboard, and here was the superb schooner herself, magnificently conquered from the arrogant foe, for the express purpose of carrying confusion and ruin amid that very enemy's fleets, a thing of power and of beauty upon the harbor's waves, the Stars and Stripes at her gaff.

Moreover, inasmuch as the war was much more popular at the South than at the North, this auspicious opening of hostilities by a single vessel, together with all the romantic associations surrounding her capture and subsequent transformation, was so much the more emphatic as a reflection of the public hopes and in commemoration of the day.

The people were wild with jubilant excitement over the arrival. The Sea Wraith was speedily surrounded by flotillas of small boats, while the wharves were crowded with spectators eagerly feasting their eyes upon the graceful craft.

By noon (the Wraith had reached her anchorage early in the day) the guns of the fort boomed forth its special salute over the happy event; delegations both civil and military were hurriedly organized to welcome the gallant ship's company; the young skipper was everywhere hailed as the Privateer Prince, and his subordinates were only less idolized than himself in the congratulations that ensued.

All this was naturally gratifying to the young man's vanity, and yet he was impatient to expedite his business with the national authorities, and to be once more up and away in his hound of the seas.

A number of considerations already hinted at were the occasion of this impatience, but one item of information in particular which had been in waiting for him made Captain Frank wish to be off.

This was to the effect that Lord Oldcourt and two others had effected their escape from the Sussex in a small boat during a dense fog at the entrance to New York Harbor, and had most probably succeeded in joining one or another of the British war-ships that were known to be hovering off Sandy Hook.

"Powder an' bombshells!" roared Uncle Bob Blowlock, when this intelligence was communicated to him as perhaps having more or less connection with his niece's safety from the unscrupulous Britisher's pursuit; "why didn't we string up that swell blackguard to our yard-arm, like a smoked mackerel on a kitchen hook, when we had him in our clutch? Howsomever, I do hope that Jessie has had the good sense to run up to her grandmother's in New York fer the summer, which would at least render old Quogue Beach less attractive to the villain fer some time ter come."

Frank said nothing in response, though his mental anxiety was apparent enough, and the struggle between his sense of public duty and the burning desire to assure himself of his sweetheart's safety or fresh peril, as the case might be, was a tough one.

Accordingly, on the very next day he set out for Washington, where, though Congress had

adjourned, the President and his Cabinet were understood to be in daily conference over war measures.

He was fortunately successful in securing his letters-of-marque from the authorities, without delay, to say nothing of the additional honors that were everywhere heaped upon him in the national capital.

It was not before the ninth day of July, however, that the gallant Sea Wraith set sail down the Chesapeake on what was generally understood was to be her testing cruise.

None could have set sail under more flattering auspices or with a nobler prestige.

Her entire original crew were on board, their pockets and wallets heavy with prize-money, and the brief glory of the vessel's initial career seemed to be an earnest of a long and yet more promising future.

But, hardly was she outside the capes before she was compelled to show her flashing heels to a British frigate, evidently intent on her capture. She evaded her pursuer with the gracefulness of a sea-bird, while knocking her bowsprit into kindling-wood with a round-shot from her Long Tom, at parting.

Then it was straight away for a blue water, in a wide detour for the Long Island Coast, in order to avoid the fleet of heavy blockaders that were by this time said to be collecting from almost everywhere off the middle Atlantic seaboard at the rallying summons of war.

"You will make as direct as possible, I suppose, sir, for Quogue Beach?" inquired Knowlesby at the close of the second day out.

"Yes," replied Frank, "we can recruit our crew to our full complement thereabouts, and I must secure old Seth Stratton for a second mate's berth. I have already told you about Seth. Then there are Tom Ratchet and Smith Flannagan, both splendid sailors, and I doubt not that we can secure at least forty good and true men, aching for privateering adventure, from among my old alongshore neighbors."

"Besides, there ought to be some good prize-pickings of Montauk and thereaway, and I have some brief private business on shore."

He made no allusion to his love affair, though Uncle Bob, who was boastfully loquacious when in his cups, which was oftener than was agreeable, had long ere this made it the common property of the ship's company, among whom beautiful Jessie and their young commander's romantic passion had become much food for interesting speculation.

There was yet another private matter that Frank was bent upon attending to at the earliest opportunity, which even Uncle Blowlock could know little or nothing about.

This was an interview of explanation with his own mother, who was a very remarkable and something of a mysterious woman, and of which more will be known later on.

"All right, captain," rejoined the mate, when about to go on deck. "But I hope you won't forget my warning as to that fellow Kelly, your steward."

Frank sunk back in the saloon chair he was occupying in gloomy thought, which he managed to successfully dissemble, however, as the man alluded to made his appearance.

CHAPTER X.

TEMPEST AND SUNSHINE.

THE mate's warning came from a suspicion which had reached his ears while in Baltimore that Kelly had been in communication with some one from New York who might be in the secret interest of his late master, Lord Oldcourt.

"Bring me a glass of weak grog," ordered the young man, a little sharply, studying the fellow furtively. "And then you may take an airing forward, if you like, Kelly."

The steward obeyed, looking a little surprised, if not uneasy, as he disappeared.

While Frank was turning the matter over in his mind the cry of "Sail ho!" brought him on deck, and unfortunately he did not give the mate's warning a second thought.

The sail sighted proved to be a Halifax brigantine with a fair cargo, which was summarily gobbled up as a prize; and then, for the next three or four days, she had her hands full with making and disposing of prizes from various British small-fry, the majority of which were burnt as not being worth the expense of prize-crews.

When seventy miles or so south of Long Island, there sprung up what promised to be a severe summer storm from the northeast. The queenly craft was put in readiness for it, and was soon scudding away before the fierce gusts under little more than bare poles.

"We've plenty of sea-room," observed Frank, with his accustomed cheerfulness, "and we might as well test our beauty's qualities in a really big sea first as last."

"The test won't be lacking, sir," replied Knowlesby, who was at his side on the quarter-deck, "though I haven't a glimmering doubt of her seaworthiness. Ha!"

The exclamation was evoked by a shaft of lightning zigzagging out of the jet-black of the stormy sky, the crash of thunder that followed being simply terrific.

Then came the rain in blinding torrents, accompanied by the full blast of the tornado, with a wild scream, and the sea, which had been high previously, was straightway lashed into leaping mountains, while the noonday was almost a dark as night.

But the Wraith was feathering the crests, under her close-reefed spanker, with the buoyancy of a cork, and all was snug and taut aloft and aloft.

"Hold hard!" at last yelled Knowlesby, as a particularly monster wave was seen careering like a live, mad thing for the starboard quarter, while Uncle Bob reinforced the warning with a dolorous blast from his boatswain's whistle. "Here comes a crusher!"

But the monster wave rolled under, instead of over, with only a showering of spray along decks, and the danger was past.

"Still we may catch one aboard yet," said the mate, and he passed the lookout warning along forward among the watch. "Lightly as we ride 'em now, there's no telling when we may be half-buried by one of those big ones."

The words were hardly out of his mouth when there came another flash and crash, in comparison with which the first was as nothing.

The stanch schooner trembled from stem to stern, showing that she had at least been touched by the bolt, and as she at once began to fall off from her course, Knowlesby sprang to the wheel with a hoarse cry.

"What was it?" inquired Frank, approaching him with difficulty over the sloping deck.

The mate simply nodded his head to the wheelman, a fine sailor named Blackwell, who sat bolt upright at his post, but with the spokes fallen from his grip, his face white as snow, a staring, stony look in his fixed, wide-open eyes.

The young commander could not repress a shudder. The man was stone-dead, nailed to his seat by the lightning-bolt, which had made a small, splintering hole in the deck at his feet, without further apparent damage.

While the poor fellow's place was supplied with another seaman from the port watch, Frank was surprised to see the steward, evidently just up the companionway, maintaining his foothold on the bounding deck with a hard grip on the poop-coamings.

"Why are you here, Kelly?" he demanded, not without commiseration for the pitiable terror—and perhaps something else that escaped his notice—the man's aspect. "You ought to remain below."

"Oi know Oi ought, your Honor," the steward managed to reply, with chattering teeth, "but, begorra, sir, Oi was so frightened that I simply c'u'dn't! Och, wurra, wurra, but it's Satan's own shtorm!"

Here there was an incoherent yell of warning from the lookout, and, by the vivid sheet of lightning which followed, a terrible sight was presented.

It was that of a frigate and a smaller vessel topping companion crests less than two cable-lengths away, and apparently about to be precipitated upon the privateer, which was sinking into a trough of the sea at the time!

Then darkness, yet another flash, and the danger was averted, if indeed it had really existed at all, both vessels having careered off to leeward as the schooner danced up out of the water-valley with her remarkable buoyancy.

"A close call, sir!" shouted Knowlesby in Frank's ear, for the roaring of the wind and the lashing of the waves and rain were almost deafening; "Britishers, too, and they must have come down on us at the beginning of the gale."

Frank did not answer, though his thoughts were sufficiently busy, for he had perceived something by that last lightning-flash which had altogether escaped his companion's attention.

It was a British officer on the poop-deck of the larger vessel, and that officer—Lord Oldcourt!

A moment later there was another warning shout from the lookout, and a towering billow was seen approaching under the quarter that was nothing less than appalling.

It dwarfed its fellows as a master mountain dwarfs its companion foot-hills.

Its high-sloping water-steep was as black, burnished glass; its curving crest, ivory-white as a demon's teeth in the tempestuous gloom, flung up myriads of little spouting fountains toward the sky, and the low, seething roar of its irresistible advance, as the schooner slipped into the attendant hollow at its base as if to invite its toppling onslaught, was suggestive of a devastating army of fiends.

"Hold hard!" yelled Frank, instinctively making a grab at a bight of rope, and at the same instant the entire decks were fairly buried under the water avalanche.

At first his sensation, while perfectly conscious of maintaining his grasp on the rope, was the gasping, suffocating one of the crushing weight of water over him.

Then, what was this? Was the bight of cordage breaking away, which did not seem possible, or being villainously, mysteriously severed?

At all events, the next instant he found himself swept overboard, far out over the starboard

taffrail reach, and with the bight of rope still in his clutch!

The young man was too much of a sailor to deem that there was any hope for him in swimming under ordinary circumstances, save as a prolongation of agony and suspense.

Indeed, the majority of sailors, or such of them as can swim (and it is a strange anomaly that but few sailors can swim), when carried overboard in a great storm at open sea, quietly fold their hands and go down to their doom resignedly, without so much as a despairing struggle, so well do they know the futility of hope as an offset to such a crowning misfortune.

Frank, nevertheless, being a capital swimmer, struck out a few strokes instinctively; then the traditions of his calling came over him, and he was about to resign himself to his doom, while the crowded incidents of his life began to rush through his brain with that mysteriousness of sequence peculiar to the drowner's wasting faculties, when a huge black mass towered above him on the summit of a gigantic wave.

Determinedly he once more struck out, and clutched something.

CHAPTER XI.

LIFE AND LOVE OUT OF DEATH.

No sooner had the privateersman skipper clutched that saving something in his terrible predicament than hope revived in his heart.

That saving something was a stout rope trailing at the stern of a great ship, which was the black mass that had loomed over him on the top of the wave before it came within his drowning clutch.

He could now support himself with ease in the water, and his more imminent peril was averted.

There came a sheeted lightning-flash, by which he threw a swift, comprehensive glance around him.

Not a sign of the schooner, from whose deck he had been washed or treacherously let slip only a minute or two before—nothing but the night-like blackness of the storm, the sweep of the rain, the tumultuous wilderness of the angry sea.

Another flash, and he looked up at the towering ship-stern that he was towing so providentially and yet so precariously in the wake of.

He read her name—TROJAN—in its brave gilt lettering, and presently, by listening intently, he could hear, or fancied he could hear, the steady tramp, tramp of a sentry, such as was the custom with vessels-of-war, especially such as included marines in their complements.

From the half-open cabin dead-lights, directly under the overhang of the stern, he caught also some rays of light reaching tremulously out over the angry waves in which he was floundering.

The vessel was doubtless one of the two that had been sighted a moment before the coming of the swamping big billow which had swept him away; hence was a Britisher and a war-ship.

He concluded at last that it would be better to take his chances on board the ship, whatever she might prove to be, than to remain where he was, and therefore set about investigating forthwith.

He drew himself partly out of the waves, and began to climb the rope, hand over hand.

Attaining the combings below the taffrail-reach, he paused for breath.

So far, so good! Below him boiled the treacherous sea, directly over his head were the port-hole gleamings.

Then, still on the rope, which trailed out from over the stern-rail, he swung himself out, gained a grip upon the most convenient port-hole ledge, cautiously hoisted the dead-light fall a little higher, and peered into the small but luxuriously furnished cabin interior within.

At first his astonishment was so great that he almost tumbled off the rope, and with difficulty abstained from an exclamation.

A young woman was the sole occupant of the cabin, and that young woman—Jessie Heartwell!

She was reclining, fully dressed, on a settle, a melancholy look on her lovely face.

At once the entire situation was clear to the astounded young sailor.

He was on the ship on which he had caught that glimpse of Lord Oldcourt by the lightning-flash, and Jessie was the latter's captive at last!

He leaned in through the port, and with a preliminary "Hist!" pronounced her name.

She started to her feet in sudden terror, but instantly recognized him.

Then she hurriedly assisted him to squeeze through the port, and the lovers were in each other's arms.

In a few minutes everything was explained. They were on the British frigate Trojan, where Lord Oldcourt was the second in command. Two days previous he had landed at Quogue with a boat's crew, and carried her off. She detested the man as much as ever, but since she was his prisoner he had treated her with the utmost kindness and delicacy, though unwavering in his declaration to carry her off to

England and make her his bride there at the earliest opportunity.

"But oh, my darling!" murmured the young girl at last: "thank God that you are with me! And yet, how unfortunate that you are here!"

"Say just the reverse, my dear," replied the young man, encouragingly. "For otherwise I must assuredly have been at the bottom of the sea."

"But Lord Oldcourt, he will kill you!"

"Some one may get hurt in trying it on."

"But you can't imagine how he hates and perhaps fears you, even apart from your being my lover. Besides, the renown of your privateering acts is already spread among the British ships, and I think there must everywhere a price be set upon your head."

"I'll bet my head they'll never get it! However, why should this man hate me, apart from my being his rival in love?"

"I don't know, but it is true. He has pestered me with all sorts of questions about your father, your mother, your ancestry generally, and has seemed to be full of some sort of brooding anxiety while doing so, though of course it was but little information I could have given him, even if I had been so disposed."

"Humph!"

Here there were a series of vivid lightning flashes, causing them to look out upon the storm.

By one of these they perceived the Sea Wraith. She was once more dangerously close to the frigate, not more than a couple of cable's lengths distant apparently, and the relative positions of the two vessels was now reversed, the schooner being to the leeward.

"A desperate chance," muttered Frank, as though thinking aloud, "but not more so than the one that has just befriended me. I think it could be risked."

By this time the electric flashes were so frequent as to be almost continuous.

"What do you mean?" inquired the girl.

"The trend of the waves is now directly toward the schooner," he continued, in the same absent tone. "Yes, it might be hazarded if—"

He turned toward her with a strange look.

"Do tell me what you mean, Frank!" she exclaimed, half-terrified.

"Jessie," slowly, "you think that death awaits me upon Lord Oldcourt's discovering my presence on this ship?"

"Yes, yes! Heavens, there can be no doubt of it!"

"Then the sea must doubtless remain my only friend, and I must trust once more to its embrace."

"Oh, do not speak thus!"

"The schooner is now to the leeward—the wash of the storm would once more be in my favor."

"What do you mean, dearest?"

"You would not wish to remain here in this man's power, Jessie?"

"No, no, no! What a question!"

He suddenly drew her closer to his breast and murmured something impressively in her ear, as if it were too desperate a proposition to even speak aloud.

A startled, all but horrified look came into Jessie's face, but it soon passed.

"Yes, I consent," she said at last, with sudden energy. "It is terrible, but better this awful risk with you than to remain here. Come, shall we go by this port-hole?"

"Brave, true heart!" He again clasped her to his heart and kissed her wildly. "It is doubtless selfish to demand that you should share such a hazard with me, but—but, I simply can't give you up, Jessie!"

"Say no more, dearest." She was the calmer of the two now. "Come!" and she made a step toward the opening.

"Not that way," he said. "See! The positions of the vessels are slowly changing. Dropped from the stern here, the wash of the storm would sweep us far abaft the schooner's stern-post. You can see that?"

"True, true!"

"We must try to steal out across the quarter-deck unobserved."

"Nearly everybody is on deck, and the lighting is very incessant."

"Still, we must take the chances. The sea will be warm, but that gown of yours is so white and conspicuous. If you only had a dark-colored wrap for the mere crossing of the deck to the port rail!"

"Wait, then."

She disappeared into the curtained alcove where she had doubtless been lying down until frightened out of it by the fury of the storm.

As for the privateersman, he was clad in his British tar's suit, as a weather-shedder, which would increase his own chance of escaping detection, though at Baltimore he had obtained more suitable clothing, not only for himself, but for his entire ship's company.

When Jessie reappeared, she was enveloped in a long loose cloak, and a new calmness and courage were imprinted on her sweet face.

He saw that she had been praying.

"Come!" she said; and, without another word they slipped forward into the saloon.

CHAPTER XII.

A DESPERATE HAZARD.

It being nearly midday, notwithstanding the night-like obscurity of the storm, a couple of stewards were busying themselves about the saloon as industriously as the crazy rolling and pitching of the ship would admit.

The intruders, however, managed to elude their attention until they had disappeared into some pantries on the starboard side, and then, swiftly traversing the saloon, reached the foot of the companionway without detection.

A burly marine, however, musket at shoulder arms, was sentry at the top of the steps, lurchingly endeavoring to pace his rounds.

It was still almost night-dark, with tempest at its fury, and the lightning somewhat less incessant.

Signing Jessie to remain motionless, the young privateersman watched his opportunity, and stole up the steps like a cat.

The next instant he had silently seized the sentry with a thug-like grip from behind, and bundled him down the steps, musket and all, where a crashing blow behind the ear laid him out, senseless, and without a sound that could give the alarm.

"Come!" the young man whispered once more.

Together they crept up the steps, shrunk back an instant as a great flash disclosed the entire plunging deck forward, thickly peopled with anxious seamen at quarters, and then, running out swiftly over the poop, almost brushing a knot of officers, Lord Oldcourt among them, grouped about the binnacle light.

The next flash showed the pair with wonderful distinctness standing on the port quarter rail!

The girl had thrown off her voluminous wrap, and looked almost like a spirit in her light, clinging gown, her abundant fair hair streaming out wildly about her *spirituelle* but resolute white face.

Her stalwart lover was supporting her on his left arm, while clutching the mizzen-shrouds with his right.

For an instant Lord Oldcourt could not believe the evidence of his senses, while his companion officers were not less dismayed.

Then, with an astounded shout, he rushed toward the pair.

But they had leaped into the sea before he could reach the rail, and were being carried out and away down the slope of an immense billow with the rapidity of a mill-race!

Frank had not miscalculated the leeward wash of the running waves, and, moreover, their young commander had been recognized from the schooner, toward which he was being borne with his precious charge, arrow-true over the leaping seas.

A hundred saving hands were stretched out to them as the third wave lifted them close against and on a level with her starboard rail amidships.

The next instant they were safe aboard, and five minutes later, or less, Jessie was warmly in bed against a possible chill, in an exclusive cabin aft of the saloon, which she had had no difficulty in locating and appropriating from her lover's previous directions.

"Let out another reef in the mainsail," were the young commander's cool first words, "and then bear away three points. The storm is breaking."

A moment later there was a howling, thundering report, such as scouted the roaring of the elements to shame.

It was the full thundering broadside of the double-decker, being hurled in indignant protest as she climbed the steep of a giant wave.

But the shots passed harmlessly over the topmasts of the saucy rover as she sunk easily into the corresponding water-valley, and the next moment she was up and away over the leaping crests, like a bird, while crash! the thirty-pound shot from her Long Tom sent the splinters flying from the Leviathan's port rail amidships.

A little later, she was wholly beyond range in such a sea; the sun began to break through the cloud rack overhead, and the chief fury of the storm was past.

"Come down into the saloon with me, Knowlesby," said Frank, as soon as he had explained the details of his extraordinary adventure to such as were gathering around with their continued congratulations. "There's serious business on land."

As they entered it, Uncle Bob followed with a steaming bowl of gruel from the galley fire.

"The dear little gel!" exclaimed the old fellow, beamingly. "Ter think of her comin' on board of us in this way! But she'll be her purty self again when she gits this gruel, fer there's a good dash of old Jamaica inter the makin' of it."

It was as well that Jessie should have her uncle to nurse her, so that Frank offered no objection as the old chap disappeared in the direction of the cabin.

"Now send the steward, Kelly, here," said the young commander to his mate. "I'm not sure but we must yard-arm him without ceremony."

Knowlesby looked at him in surprise.

"You can't be in earnest, Frank!"
 "Ain't I, though? I'm dead sure that he cut the rope that let me off into the sea."
 "You know I am not partial to the man," replied the mate, "but I honestly think you are mistaken."

"Where is the fellow?"

"Lying down with a broken rib."

"What?"

"It is true. The smothering sea that half-buried us and carried you away crushed him up against the poop combings—close to where you were laying hold, to be sure. But when it had passed, he was wedged in between the combings and the companion-rail senseless and injured, as I have said. If he really cut you loose while under the wash, he must have been miraculously sly about it."

Still Frank, who but stubbornly relinquished a notion that once got a strong hold on him, was only half-satisfied.

"This may put a different face on it," said he. "Let us step up and examine the remnant of the bight."

They accordingly did so.

The remnant might possibly have been cut originally, but was very much unraveled now.

Then they returned to the saloon and summoned Kelly, who made his appearance with difficulty.

He was very white from undeniable suffering, and was drawn up tightly in an improvised strait-jacket so that he might breathe more easily.

"Glory be to God for your salvation, sir!" he exclaimed, pantingly. "Me own hur-rt won't inconvenience your Honor for long. Oi thrust. At all evnts, the cook, who is me docthor, says that Oi will be about me duties ag'in inside o' thray days."

Frank hadn't the heart to make the direct charge that he had intended, and accordingly dismissed him with some brief words of sympathy.

"Still, I retain my doubts," he said. "And I shall keep a sharp look upon him in the future."

"In which you will have my assistance, depend on it," observed the mate. "The man may bear watching a long time yet."

And then, after Frank had changed his clothes, they went on deck again.

By the middle of the afternoon the storm had almost wholly subsided, with a clear sky, and neither the frigate, her companion-ship, nor any other sail was in sight.

Later on there was a touch on the young commander's arm, and Jessie was at his side.

"Can you really afford passage for a young lady without any wardrobe to speak of?" she smilingly asked, looking down over her roughly dried and sadly wrinkled gown.

But her fair hair was done up prettily, and there was the flush of health in her sweet eyes and charming face.

"You'd look like an angel in anything!" cried her lover, who was only prevented from clasping her in his arms by the presence of on-lookers.

"How far are we from Quogue?"

"We should make the inlet by sunrise, or soon after."

"Thank Heaven for that! It will seem strange to be home again after what has passed—almost like a dream—but it is home."

"Jessie," said the young man, earnestly, "you mustn't think of remaining at Quogue. At your grandmother's in New York you would be quite safe till the war is over and this Old-court's insane pursuit of you is at an end."

"Tush! Just what Uncle Blowlock says. But you, perhaps, do not know that my poor aunt is bedridden?"

"No; is she so?"

"Yes; with her rheumatism, and no one to care for her but me. Heaven grant that she may not have suffered during my absence! So you see, my dear Frank, that at Quogue I remain."

"Still, at your grandmother's—"

"Not to be thought of. There!"

"Might you not take your aunt to my mother's at Sag Harbor?" suggested Frank, after some hesitation.

She gave him a peculiar look. In fact, Jessie was not a favorite with Frank's mother—who was a very odd woman, as has been said—nor was any one else, with perhaps the exception of her son.

"The idea!"

Frank frowned a little, but did not pursue the subject further.

Most likely, under the circumstances, Jessie would have to continue living at Quogue, after all, though he was very much troubled to think of it as a necessity.

CHAPTER XIII.

HOME AGAIN.

"THERE is only one other way of assuring your safety, Jessie," said Frank, after a troubled pause.

Jessie looked at him with a laugh.

"Of course," she replied. "By marrying you forthwith, and living with you on board the privateer?"

Well, and the young man slightly colored,

"yes, that was about what I was going to suggest, my dear. Though, to tell the truth, the Sea Wraith's cabin would scarcely be fit for honeymooning."

"I should say not," with another laugh, "and in the mean time what would become of Aunt Dolly? But I am suddenly reminded, my dear skipper, that I'm very hungry. Uncle Bob's gruel is well enough in its way—though the bowl in which he brought me some must have been washed in rum, instead of water, I should say—but it has hardly the substance that one naturally craves after the dip in the brine that you and I had."

"Dinner must be ready by now," returned her lover, the thoughtful shadow vanishing from his face. "It'll be hardly what you might expect of even a privateer, owing to the accident to the steward, but such as it is you are welcome and welcome to, my dear Jessie."

"I fancy we can manage, darling," with a tender look. "It must be hard fare, indeed, that our love cannot season."

Soon after sunset a sail was reported to the northeast, which finally proved to be a larger British war-vessel than it would be safe for the Wraith to tackle in the heavy sea that was still running, and the stranger, not manifesting any particular desire for a close acquaintance, she was permitted to steer away unmolested, while the privateer kept on her unaltered course.

"That's odd," observed Knowlesby, who was continuing to study the stranger very interestedly by the telescope after non-interference had been determined upon.

"What is?" inquired Frank, while Jessie also looked on, more or less curious.

"Why, that's a very big vessel for one thing," replied the mate, slowly. "Shouldn't wonder if she had sixteen or eighteen guns, and she's double our size—a regular brigantine."

"I'd willingly join issue with her, for all that, were it not for the interruption," cried the young commander. "But what is there particularly odd in what you make her out to be?"

"It's just this, captain," and Knowlesby lowered the glass with a serious air. "I believe it's the very craft that was with the frigate in the heart of that storm of this morning when we first sighted the pair of 'em almost toppling down upon us."

"You don't say so?" Frank also grew serious, as he hastily took the glass. "By Jupiter! I believe you are right. How could she have got so far north?"

"Must have run dead before the gale while the frigate and we were lingerin' under bare poles," replied the other.

Uncle Bob was brought aft for his opinion, which proved to coincide with the one expressed.

"The identicule same craft, or I'm a Algerine!" he bellowed, with his accustomed exuberance. "Whoop! Eff we could only get in a doughnut from our thirty-two on them bulgin' bow-curves, wouldn't we make the jack-straws an' puddin'-sticks fly out of her!"

"Jessie, my dear," dropping the glass, and turning self-importantly and with boisterous affectionateness to his niece, "don't you wish you was a sailor? Not an ordinary reef-tacklin', deck-swabbin' duffer, you know," with a comprehensive wave of his arm-hook that included the entire ship's company, save his august self, "but a born navigator likemysself, as you might say."

"Ah, but it's a purty perfession, my love, when skientifically pursued by one born to command, mind yer. Cats, dogs an' monkeys! I'd rather boss an oyster-boat skientifically than squat on the biggest throne-cheer on airth, crowned, skeptered an' plastered with big diamonds from keel-post to main-truck, with the mountains fer a back-rest and the ocean fer a foot-bath. But when it comes to downright navigatin' skience, by eye, ear, taste, touch an' smell—"

"That will do, boatswain," interposed Captain Frank, with assumed severity. "Forward to your quarters, if you please."

And Jessie, in spite of her relationship, could but laugh at the capering indignation with which the old fellow took himself off, blowing his whistle till his cheeks seemed nigh to bursting, and waving his hook about like a wind-mill in a storm, to the delectation of on-lookers at large.

But Frank was more troubled than he permitted it to appear by this apparition of the Trojan's companion ship so far to the north, though he would have been at a loss to tell exactly why it was so.

However, Quogue was made early the following day, without another sail having been sighted.

Frank took Jessie ashore to her aunt's, and then, while Blowlock and several other Long-Islanders were sent out through the neighboring villages for recruits to fill out the privateer's complement, he lost no time in securing a horse and setting out for the conference with his mother at Sag Harbor, which had long been haunting his mind more or less unpleasantly.

The young man's mother has been referred to more than once as a peculiar and somewhat mysterious woman.

She was a person of means, for those days, having long been a widow—in fact, Frank could but indistinctly remember his father, who had been lost at sea, as an officer in the infant American Navy, when he was little more than a child—and the young man was her only offspring. Neglected by her, save as to his school education, and early permitted to follow the bent of his adventurous disposition, he could mostly only remember his mother as a stern, hard and grandly beautiful woman, with apparently little or no sympathy for him or any one else, and with a certain mystery about her which he could never fathom.

However, he also recalled some manifestations of wild and fitful tenderness on her part, which only served to deepen his moody bewilderment concerning her. She was reported to have been high-born and of unusual attainments, and it was also said that her husband had ill-treated her, or that her married life had been unhappy, at the best.

But of all this the young man knew nothing. He had always rather dreaded than loved her, that was about all he knew, though he had always been vaguely impressed—and this impression had been strangely strengthened of late, as has been seen—that she was cognizant of some important secret with regard to himself which she was systematically, and perhaps maliciously, withholding from him.

Strange relations, these, to exist between mother and son, but perhaps less unusual in the strait-laced, ceremonial conventionalities of the period of which we write than amid the warmer and more spontaneous family conditions of the present day.

Furthermore and more generally, Mistress Freeway was widely accredited at this stage of her life with being a wise woman, seeress, doctress, or what-not, of unusual skill and perhaps occult powers. Lonely and unloved, she lived with her negro and Indian servants in a great, dreary old colonial mansion overlooking the bay from amid spacious and neglected grounds on the outskirts of the town, at that time a whaling port of considerable importance.

Frank was not offended, therefore, at his strange mother's marble impassiveness when he found himself in her presence in her stiff old drawing-room, with its faded stateliness, its stiff furniture, and its wooden-like portraits of his sea-faring paternal ancestors.

"Sit down, my son," she said, coldly, with the merest hand-touch as a greeting. "Dinner is over, but the servants shall get you something, if you are hungry. They tell me you are becoming famous, but don't give me any account of yourself, for you must know how I hate the sea."

"Don't be alarmed, my dear mother," returned the young man, quite indifferently. "I have taken care to eat my noonday meal at the village inn, and have, moreover, no intention of spinning you any sea-yarns. When have I ever ventured upon anything of the sort, by the way?"

"True," she sniffed at a smelling-bottle which she carried, together with an enormous lace handkerchief, in her hand, and then bent her hard, steely-gray eyes—that might have been exceedingly beautiful in her haughty earlier years, however—in a study of the great-patterned, faded carpet at her toes, "you cannot be accused of inconsiderateness in that respect, my son."

"Nor in any other, I trust, mother."

"No, no; oh, no!"

Frank began to grow restless and disgusted, as he always did sooner or later at these infrequent interviews, always so much alike in their unvarying dead-level of heartlessness, while it was easy to see that his mother was likewise wishing it at an end.

How often had he regarded her, as he was regarding her now, and with just such an angry discontent in his lonely, never-mothered heart! So stiff, so handsome, so stately and so severe, in the antique flowered brocade, that would have stood alone of its own texture, and even without the unconscionable hoops of the period that ballooned its skirt around her, and in her old-fashioned ruff, lace wristlets and iron-gray curl-puffs! A woman like enough with a history which he might never fathom, and yet be her own and only son!

As upon previous occasions, he momentarily forgot his policy and made an impatient movement.

She looked up in icy rebuke.

"Why are you here, then, if you have nothing to say, permit me to inquire?" she said.

"Is it so unnatural that a man should wish to see his own mother occasionally?" cried Frank.

She slightly elevated both her shoulders and her eyebrows.

"Yes," even more coldly, "when you are the man and I the mother."

CHAPTER XIV.

MOTHER AND SON.

THE young man made an impatient exclamation, undecided how to begin.

"Why are you here?" his strange mother continued.

"I want to know something," blurted out

Frank, "and I intend to know it, too, sooner or later."

She looked at him severely, almost contemptuously.

"Oh, you want to know something?" she said, mockingly. "Is it possible? And what is it you want to know, pray?"

"I want to know about this ring!" exclaimed Frank, savagely thrusting the jewel toward her, "and the secret of my life connected with it."

For a single instant her impassiveness was shaken by a wild, furious look, and then she was her marble self again.

"You talk like a fool!" she said, disdainfully. "How often have you hinted this inquisitiveness uselessly!"

"But not as now," cried Frank, throwing a hard, metallic tone into his voice and manner that was not a bad reflex of her own. "Now I know something about it, and I am determined to know the rest."

"What do you know?"

He briefly related the hints he had received from Lord Oldcourt and Kelly, the steward.

There was another slight disturbance of her iciness, but so slight as to be scarcely perceptible.

"This is the rankest folly," she said, contemptuously.

"Is it? We shall see about that, mother mine!" bitterly. "Is the ring really an heirloom of the significance that has been suggested to me?"

"Find out elsewhere, if you are such a romantic fool as to take stock in such stuff. The ring was your father's, as you know."

"And his father's and grandfather's before him, I suppose?"

"Like enough," indifferently.

"Mother, who was the original Freeway in this country? You must have learned this much from my father, and ought to know."

"Don't dare to speak to me of your father!" exclaimed the woman, with a sort of congealed fierceness, so to speak. "Do you forget how I inculcated that, as a forbidden theme between us, in your mind?"

"Forget it, when it is about the only thing you ever did inculcate there?"

"No matter. I accorded you such an education as I could afford, and then you followed your bent—the bent of the Freeways!" scornfully. "The sea, the sea, always the accursed sea! As if that were not enough"—her icy indignation increased as she proceeded—"you had to succumb to the allurements of a pretty face, with not a handful of king's pence to back it—a chit of an American fisher-girl without family, position, individuality—"

"Mother, stop!" suddenly interrupted the young man, with a harsh fury that even the statue-like woman before him could not wholly disregard. "But look here," he continued, mastering himself by a great effort, "we are getting off our subject entirely, and I don't want to do that."

She made a slight sign of indifference, that was all.

"Mother," he went on, "I want you to tell me if the original Freeway in this country—my father's grandfather, I believe—might have been the missing eldest son of Lord Talbot Oldcourt, as suggested to me by Kelly, the present Lord Oldcourt's former valet."

"How should I know? Live in the dream of such a glittering absurdity, if you choose."

"But I want to live and act in the reality, for if it was as I have hinted, and can be so proved, I am unquestionably the rightful heir to an ancient name and to vast English and Irish estates at this day, and that injurious hound, the present incumbent, is an impostor and a usurper!"

"Ah, if it can be proved!" mockingly.

"That is what I intend to discover from you."

"Do you, indeed? And yet, I thought you were such an ultra-American, a republican," scornfully, "with even a pride in your present name."

"Right you are!" lightly, "and don't you imagine that I would care a continental for any other name than Freeway, or any title, howsoever moldering and ancient, other than I may win for myself by hard fighting against my country's enemies on the broad high seas. You'll be sadly out of your reckoning if you do."

"Freeway? Why, there's a sea-breezy freedom and way about it that is after my own heart. In Baltimore on the glorious Fourth, where I was made not a little of, I assure you, they even celebrated me in a printed rhyme, that was sung everywhere on the streets, in which the Freeway was made to jingle most nautically with seaway and leeway and I don't remember what else."

"Oh, no! a truce to any other name. But as to the Oldcourt estates—ah, that is quite a different thing. And besides, they might give me my best weapon with which to punish my worst enemy in the world. There you are, mother mine!"

Was it a passing glint of admiration in her cold eyes that had been watching his handsome,

reckless face when animated by his free, gay talk. If so, it was only a glint, and was then gone.

"You have made quite a little speech, my son!" was her sneering comment.

Frank flushed.

"Will you give me satisfaction on this point, mother, or will you not?" he demanded.

"No."

"Could you, if you would?"

"I have nothing to say."

The young man resolved to risk a bold ruse that just at this moment occurred to him.

"You sneer at the possibility of there being proofs," he said. "And yet if those certain musty old papers in your possession—"

She started bolt upright, glaring at him with something that might be terror.

"Papers?" she almost gasped. "Proofs? Boy, you are crazy! What do you know of such things?"

"Nothing like so much as you do, I must confess," was the cool reply, though he had never suspected such an existence until now.

She was now icier and more severe than at any time before, and nothing that he could say or taunt could evoke more than frigid negatives from her lips.

"Mother, are we English by birth?" he presently asked, not a little exasperated.

"What do you want to know for?" almost menacingly.

"I have often suspected it from such national opinions as I have ever heard you give expression to. That is all."

For answer, she pulled a convenient bell-cord, and a powerful man-servant, of mixed negro and Shinnecock Indian blood, appeared.

"Show that person out of my house!" exclaimed Mistress Freeway, pointing at her son. "If he should resist, summon your fellow-servants and drive him forcibly hence!"

The giant made his obeisance, while furtively throwing a half-deprecating, half-beseeching look at the young man.

Frank, who had angrily risen, hat in hand, hesitated, and then strode away, without a word and without a parting look.

"Never dare to see me again!" called out the pitiless, icy voice after him. "Disobey me, and it will be at your peril."

This was a little worse than poor Frank had anticipated, though he had not built very promisingly upon the outcome of the interview.

As he was passing slowly through the shaded grounds, a skinny black hand beckoned him from behind a great tree.

Responding to the signal, he found Anala, an old slave woman, said to be of prodigious old age, and looking all of it, with whom he had been a favorite as a child.

"Marse Frank," mumbled the old woman, with an earnest but scared look, "doan't yo' beleebe her. Dere is dem ole papers, an' I'se gwine to help yer get 'em some day, honey."

She hobbled away in the direction of the house before he could question her.

Then, before he was fairly out from among the trees, there was a cautious call behind him, and he was overtaken by the half-breed Hercules.

"Ah, Milo, it is you?"

"Yes, Marse Frank," replied the colossus, half out of breath. "Oh, Marse Frank, take me wif yer on der pribateer!" eagerly. "I'se sick to deff here, an' yer knows ole Milo as a good sailor-man, what sailed an' fit eben under yo' fader afore yer."

"You shall come," said Frank, promptly. "Are there others whom you could bring with you—good men and true?"

"Yes, yes; free or four."

"All right. Meet me at the inn within two hours. Still more men, whom I have succeeded in recruiting, will be there. You shall all accompany me back to Quogue without delay."

The man disappeared with a joyful exclamation.

Frank felt a little better satisfied with himself now. He knew the cross-breed as a good man-of-war's-man, brave as steel, and of tremendous physical strength.

A few hours later he set out for Quogue on horseback, accompanied by upward of a dozen valuable recruits, sailors and fighting men, on foot, Milo and three other cross-breeds among them.

CHAPTER XV.

IN THE RUNNING FOAM.

BRIEF halts had to be made at both Bridgehampton and Southampton, so that it was after sunset when the party approached Quogue.

But before this the sound of cannonading at sea had set them to hurrying their pace.

What could it mean?

Frank kicked and lashed his wretched beast along the sandy road, from which the view of the adjacent ocean was shut off by intervening hills and dunes, but at best could not proceed much faster than the men who were on foot.

At last a boy was seen running toward them from the direction of the village.

"Thank the Lord you're come, Captain Frank!" exclaimed the lad, as soon as he could

recover his breath. "The English—Miss Jessie—the privateer!"

"Out with it!" roared Frank, dragging the boy along with him by a clutch of the arm, while mending his pace as best he might. "Is it an attack?"

"Yes, y'—was the panted reply. "The Wraith is engaging a big brigantine in the offing, but—but—"

"Quick! quick!"

"But two boat-loads of Britishers have landed. They're bein' fit by the village men, but are makin' their retreat to the beach, and—and—"

"Well, well?"

"They've got Jessie Heartwell again!"

Frank flung himself in a fury from the back of his worthless beast and drew his sword.

His recruits were for the most part weaponless, having anticipated nothing of such a sudden emergency awaiting them.

"Snatch up anything—stones, clubs, anything!" foamed the young commander. "That's it. Hurry, hurry! Now come on at the double quick!"

The cannonading had continued, and there was the scattering rattle of musketry from the direction of the beach.

At last, as the party came out on a rise in the road overlooking both beach and village, a stirring and startling scene presented itself.

The brigantine and the privateer were having it hot in the offing about two miles from shore, with the advantage perhaps in favor of the latter, while a strong squad of British tars and marines were hurriedly retreating over the sand-stretches toward the sea, where a couple of ship's boats were awaiting them out in the shallows, more or less vigorously pursued by a small mob of poorly-armed village men, and Jessie, lovely, unfortunate Jessie, was once more a captive.

She could be seen now and then tossing up her arms and apparently struggling wildly but vainly enough, from amid the group that was hurrying her away.

Prominent among them, sword in hand, was a naval officer, who, however, even at this distance, Frank perceived to be other than Lord Oldcourt—and, indeed, it would have been hardly possible for the latter to have transferred himself from the Trojan to the brigantine in so short a time after the separation of the two vessels by the storm.

To add to the misery of this unhappy scene, a column of smoke was seen ascending from a spot near the village, and presently old Blowlock's cottage was perceived to be in flames.

Captain Frank stamped upon the ground like a wild man in his fury and consternation.

However, by hard running over the difficult sands, he and his party were now within less than a quarter of a mile of the harder immediate beach over which the running fight was being continued.

"On! on!" he shouted. "Jessie must be saved, if we have to fight for her swimming, or with the water up to our arm-pits. On, on!"

They made a last desperate spurt, and were at last upon the scene, the villagers, with old Blowlock at their head, setting up a yell of fierce greeting to the reinforcement, though the majority of his band were no better armed than the new-comers.

But the Britishers were already at the water's edge, looking out through the rippling waves toward their boats, front face to their motley foe, their struggling captive still in their clutch.

"Help, help, Frank!" cried Jessie, piteously. "These wretches are under Lord Oldcourt's orders. Don't let me be carried off again. Help, Frank, help!"

No need of the iteration of that piteous appeal.

Her lover was already upon the abductors' flank, amid showers of bullets, sticks and stones, Blowlock, Seth Stratton, Tom Ratchet, the giant cross-breed and the rest at his back, and then it was hand-to-hand and tooth-and-nail for the possession of the girl, knee-deep in the running foam.

"Blowlock, see to Jessie, and nothing else!" exclaimed Frank, shooting one of the girl's immediate captors dead, stretching out another with a cutlass-stroke, and then, almost touching her outstretched hand, as a dozen brawny jack-tars swept in between, pressing momentarily back. "Here, you, Mr. Crumly! face me single-handed, if you dare!" gnashing his teeth.

The officer thus particularized—who was, indeed, the passed midshipman who had been Oldcourt's second in command on the whilom Scorpion—responded to the challenge, nothing loth, and for an instant the two hung together in the clamoring press and the reddening waves, blade to blade in single combat, and about equally matched.

But at the same instant old Blowlock sunk to his knees, under a murderous blow on the top of the head with a musket-butt, after braining his nearest foeman with a crashing stroke of his iron-hooked oaken arm, and Jessie was being hurried out nearly as far as the first boat.

However, at this juncture there was a savage

howl, more like the hoarse roar of a charging wild beast than of a human voice, a tornado-like rush, and the condition of affairs was changed as if by magic.

It was the great cross-breed, Milo, shouldering his way to the rescue, though with no other weapons than his brawny fists.

The rapidity and irresistibility of the blows that he dealt out whirlingly with those appalling fists!

Everything seemed to go down, right and left, from the path of his invincible onset.

In another moment he had snatched the girl from her abductors, just as Skipper Frank stretched his individual in the blood-dyed waters at his feet with a thundering cutlass-slash across the shoulder-guard.

The enemy succeeded in regaining their boats, with their wounded, but not without leaving a dozen or more of their dead behind them, while the loss to the villagers, owing to their inferior weapons, had been even more severe.

In the mean time, the privateer had about whipped off the brigantine, while both parties seemed to have drawn off under a temporary cessation of hostilities, doubtless to repair damages, though there seemed to be other business rife on board the schooner, as if Knowlesby might be having an unlooked-for card up his sleeve.

"Here, Milo!" cried Frank, returning a pressure of Jessie's hand, and then resigning her to the giant's keeping. "Back to the village with the young lady, with a dozen men of your own picking, and guard her with your lives till you hear again from me."

But, scarcely had Jessie disappeared with her rough custodians before a cry of mingled wonder and alarm arose along the beach.

CHAPTER XVI.

LOST AND WON.

THERE was cause enough for both the bewilderment and the alarm.

In the first place, the privateer had suddenly opened fire on her antagonist again, under cover of which a boat was seen quitting her side, with a barrel of gunpowder in its stern, and for a purpose sufficiently obvious.

Then the defeated Britons were still hovering off-shore in their boats, with the evident intention of renewing the attack at their first opportunity.

And that was as evidently at hand.

Even as these particulars of the situation were being noted by Frank Freeway and his remaining defenders of the beach, whom he was busily organizing to the best of his ability, there came the whistling scream of a bombshell from the eastward, which burst directly over their heads.

Then the frigate Trojan, from which it had been hurled, suddenly put in an appearance from just behind Southampton Head, less than four miles away.

And this was not the worst of it, for suddenly there was a British battle cheer, and a large squad of tars and marines, doubtless from boats which had effected a landing in one of the minor inlets to the east, was seen advancing on the village at a quick-step, and over the sandy road that Frank and his Sag Harbor recruits had traversed an hour previously in hurrying to Jessie's rescue.

"Back to the village!" shouted the young commander, suiting the action to the word by at once putting his valiant but poorly-armed band in motion accordingly. "It is for home and fireside now, and the young lady must not again fall into those dastardly hands."

This was more easily ordered than carried out.

Scarcely had the Americans started to return to the village before the men from the brigantine reloaded through the light surf, and hung upon their rear, eager to avenge their recent reverse, and firing several scattering volleys with more or less effect.

But the latter were only entrapped, after all, for about this time the privateer's boat was seen to make its improvised torpedo fast to the brigantine's starboard bow.

There was a flash, a deafening explosion, a far-scattering of plank, spar and tackle in splintered shreds amid a cloud of powder-smoke, and the brigantine was no more.

The latter's men on shore, seeing themselves thus cut off by the disaster to their ship, and being less ably led by the warrant-officer who had taken the wounded Mr. Crumly's place, came to an irresolute pause.

Then Frank, when not yet midway to the village, suddenly brought his shoremen about-face, and charged back upon them with such fierceness that they wavered, and finally broke again for their boats in a disorderly panic.

A number were cut, shot or clubbed down without mercy, whereupon the remainder, fifteen strong, surrendered at discretion.

Their captured muskets and cutlasses were a godsend in supplying the victors with much needed arms and ammunition.

But, in the mean time the privateer had put out to sea on the approach of the big frigate, and the latter began shelling the shore system-

atically, but at the same time in but a timid, half-effective way, for fear of damaging their own men as much as the Americans; while, moreover, from her great draught of water, and the tide being out, she could not venture within less than two miles of the shore, which likewise tended to modify the effectiveness of her mortar practice.

Frank could afford, therefore, to be comparatively content with his partial success, though still terribly anxious on Jessie's account.

He had no sooner secured his prisoners, however, and distributed their weapons among his own men, when there was heard the rattle of musketry from over the intervening ridge of sand-hills, and then a boy came running down to say that the frigate's boat's crews were attacking the village.

"Right-about, and forward!" he shouted, afresh, waving his sword. "Homes and sweet-hearts!"

Then the double-quick was again taken up for the village, notwithstanding the fatigue of the men, who appeared to be kept up solely by the fire of their patriotism, together with the stress of the individual situation.

A very tall Canadian, from among the prisoners, came running up from the rear, and overtook Frank soon after the march was resumed.

"Is it now, sir," he inquired, half out of breath, "against Lord Oldcourt and for the young lady you are fighting?"

The young commander nodded, looking at the man in surprise.

"I'm with you now, then, if you'll let me be," eagerly, and snatching up a chance club in lieu of his surrendered musket, the fellow fell in marching line at Frank's elbow.

"I don't know about that. Who are you?"

"Sandy Andrews, by name, sir," (he spoke with a broad Acadian accent, which is not reproduced here), "and a man with good cause to hate Lord Oldcourt. I was coxswain with him on the Scorpion."

Still, Frank had the similar case of Kelly, his steward, in mind.

"Better fall back under the guard with your comrades," said he, coldly. "We're solid Americans in line here."

"So am I, though from the wrong side of the St. Lawrence, sir. Do trust me. Ye may be less able to scorn a willing recruit than ye fancy."

He threw a glance back seaward as he spoke, and Frank did likewise.

Three boats were putting off from the frigate, loaded with reinforcements.

"All right!" replied the young privateersman then, and the motley column swept on up the sandy ridge.

A chorus of angry groans arose from the men as they passed the smoking ruins of the Blowlock cottage.

Bedridden Aunt Dolly was being ministered to by a humble neighbor, while lying stretched on a mattress under a tree, having been carried out of the house at the time it was fired by the sailors from the brigantine when Jessie was seized by them.

At this piteous sight a furious shout arose against the prisoners—Uncle Bob had accompanied the squad having the young lady under guard, or there might have been something worse yet in store for them—and even Frank turned frowningly upon the Acadian, Andrews.

"Dastard work!" he exclaimed.

"We were under Mr. Crumly's orders, sir," was the reply, "and he had had his instructions from Lord Oldcourt to this effect beforehand."

All this time the party was hurrying on, and the next line of dunes they surmounted showed them a devastating spectacle.

It was that of nearly the entire village in flames, and of Jessie's custodians holding their own with the utmost difficulty against the Britishers, while posted on a little pine-covered knoll but a short distance away.

But they were but a mere handful, while the tars and marines were fully forty in number, and splendidly armed.

However, Frank and his beachmen lost not a moment in charging upon the enemy's rear, with a ringing cheer, and an effective volley.

Then Blowlock, with the gigantic Milo at his side, and the others of Jessie's guard, made a simultaneous sally from the grove, and for a short time it looked as if the frigate's men would be routed.

But even while the struggle was at its height, there was a shout from the sand-ridge, so recently crossed by Frank's party, and the reinforcing boats' crews from the Trojan, with Lord Oldcourt at their head, came charging down in their turn, fully fifty strong, armed to the teeth and perfectly fresh.

At the same instant Andrews, the Canadian, went down at the young privateersman's side, shot through the lungs, while even the towering cross-breed, after causing half a dozen of his nearest foes to bite the dust, was brought to his knees by a thundering blow with a clubbed musket on the back of the neck, which put him temporarily at least out of the fight.

Though all seemed lost, Frank managed to rally his men in some degree, and as the fresh

Britishers came on he snapped his pistol point-blank at Oldcourt's breast.

But the treacherous weapon missed fire, and the next minute, with most of his followers, he was hurled back, wounded, before the fury of the oncoming charge.

"Come with me!" said a hoarse voice in his ear, and he felt a strong grip on his arm, dragging him back into the grove. "We'll see after Jessie together."

It was old Seth Stratton who spoke, and old Blowlock was before them on a similar errand as they staggered into the wood.

But the fates were against them, and Jessie Heartwell had been but won to be lost again.

She had hardly rushed, with a cry, into her lover's arms, when the victorious tars charged overwhelmingly through the wood, and Frank, after skewering one man with his disengaged sword-hand, suddenly lost consciousness.

When he came to himself a few seconds later, it was with empty arms, and the struggle was at an end.

The Britishers were already retreating toward the sea, and Jessie was being dragged along with them, with Lord Oldcourt's grasp upon her wrist.

CHAPTER XVII.

A LONG SEA CHASE BEGUN.

THE young commander had managed to regain his feet only to realize this lamentable state of affairs.

Then he fainted again.

When he once more recovered, his wound, which was unimportant save for the loss of blood it had caused him, was being dressed by Seth Stratton, while a moonlight quiet was upon the corpse-strewn earth and the smoking ruins of the late happy village.

Far to seaward, in the southeast, was the broad shadow of a slowly-vanishing sail.

"It's the frigate, Frank," said Stratton, in answer to the young man's look of inquiry. "Yes, and with Jessie on board."

Frank with difficulty stifled a bitter groan, though the information was nothing more than he should have suspected.

"How fares it with the rest of our brave boys, Seth?" he presently asked.

"Better than we might have feared," was the reply. "We have lost but seven killed, and the wounded are for the most part doing well. The Britishers left behind them eighteen dead men in all."

"Our prisoners—the brigantine's boat-crews?"

"Recaptured, of course."

"Old Blowlock and Milo?"

"Almost themselves again. The old man is now getting up some sort of shelter for Aunt Dolly, while the cross-breed is helping with the other wounded."

"There's another sail to seaward," said Frank, pointing to the object, a mere speck on the horizon, directly to the south.

"It ought to be the Sea Wraith on her return."

The young commander started to his feet, with a bound that set his wound to throbbing and his head to spinning.

The Sea Wraith, his noble privateer, so victorious and yet so newly tried in her glorious career. He feasted his eyes on that far speck in the distant moonlight. Could his dear love, even when again in Oldcourt's power, be wholly irretrievably lost to him, so long as he could still 'move the monarch of that torpedo deck,' control the destinies of that magnificent craft?

Still he said, slowly:

"Strange that the frigate has not lingered to intercept her return!"

"She seemed to have no further use for us after his lordship had secured the girl," replied Stratton, looking moodily upon the scene of desolation that surrounded them. "Oh, Frank, if we had only guessed who Courtold, the smuggler, really was when he was here among us daily only such a short time ago."

The young privateersman's eyes flashed gloomily.

"Patience, old shipmate," he replied, in a voice of suppressed fury. "The end of, the reckoning is not yet."

"You mean that you will follow him up to get her back?"

"To the death, and through the whole British navy, if need be! Wait, wait, wait! I shall be myself again when once more on my peerless schooner's long deck, with the free gale on our quarter, and the universe of blue water before me, where to choose!"

"And I'm with you to the death, mate!" exclaimed the older sailor, grasping his hand.

Here Tom Ratchet came to say that Andrews, the Canadian, was at the point of death from his wound, and was desirous of communicating something of importance to Frank.

"I think it's summat about Lord Oldcourt," said Tom. "At all events, the poor devil hain't many more breaths left in him to tell it with."

Frank lost no time in hurrying to the dying man's side.

"I have a certain knowledge of Lord Old-

court's plans, sir," Andrews managed to say disjointedly. "I learnt of 'em when I was coxswain on board the Scorpion that was, though in a manner that there's no time to explain now."

"What do you know, my poor fellow?" inquired Frank, most kindly. "Anything you can tell me that will help me in my pursuit of the villain, I shall be most grateful for."

"I knew you would be, sir," responded the moribund, with increasing difficulty. He was shot through the lungs, every breath that he drew seeming to cause him intense suffering. "You treated me kindly when I was a poor prisoner in your hands, deserving nothing better than death, perhaps. Sandy Andrews has never yet forgotten a good turn."

"What have you to tell me?"

"Lord Oldcourt—he will shortly be assigned to—the sloop-of-war *Battle Queen*—one of the fastest crafts in the British service—about to be detached from the fleet for a cruise against you Americans and the Frenchmen in the Spanish Main."

"What! you are sure of this?"

"Yes, yes; no doubt. He will have chief command—will doubtless carry the young lady with him—and—oh, if I could only catch another breath to tell you more, sir, but—"

A last hemorrhage from his wound choked his utterance, and in a few seconds all was over with him.

The young commander was, however, grateful enough for the intelligence, inasmuch as, should it prove correct, it was much more encouragement for his hope of again snatching his sweetheart from her abductor than to know of the latter's intention to carry her directly to England.

"Do any of you happen to know anything of this sloop-of-war *Battle Queen*?" he presently asked of those around him.

"That I do, my hearty!" cried old Tom Stratton. "She was new in their service when I was boatswain's mate on the French frigate *Invincible* ten years ago."

"As good a ship and sailer as this poor fellow intimated?"

"Ay, my boy, all o' that. A full twenty-gunner, to boot, with three hundred men as her complement."

Frank's eyes blazed.

"A good target for the *Sea Wraith's* chase!" he exclaimed. "But we may pick up something more with regard to this later on."

By daybreak of the following day the returned privateer was awaiting her young commander in the offing, but little the worse from her few scars received in the duel with the defunct brigantine.

Frank only lingered two days, during which Aunt Dolly was provided with a new home at Southampton, while his men rendered valuable assistance toward the rehabilitation of the devastated village.

Then it was Southward ho! as the gallant privateer set sail upon the cruise that was to prove the extraordinary one in her adventurous and thrilling career.

Fortune seemed with her almost from the very outset.

On the second day out from Quogue she captured without resistance a large British transport having on board fifty pressed American sailors, gathered in from various quarters by the arrogant search-ships, and on their way to be distributed among the different men-of-war composing the British North Atlantic fleet.

All were able seamen, still indignant over their wrongs, and they joyfully joined the privateer to a man, thus, together with the recruits gathered in from along the south-shore villages, considerably more than completing out her full complement of fighting men.

Then the bold sea-rover was, for a preliminary week or two, in and out among the British fleet like a veritable besom of conquest and destruction, though with the main object, on her commander's part, of obtaining definite information of Lord Oldcourt's whereabouts and intentions.

Even this object was finally achieved in a most fortunate and unexpected manner at the end of the third week out.

It was at the tail-end of a great midsummer gale of extraordinary severity, which the privateer had only succeeded in riding out by exceptional good management and staunch qualities, that a huge British man-of-war was fallen in with in about the last stages of distress.

Almost wholly dismantled by the storm, and also bearing indubitable signs of recent battle-knocks, she seemed to have been wholly abandoned, a helpless derelict at the mercy of the still furious though fast-subsiding seas.

But a hail from the privateer at last brought a handful of hopeless-looking men in view on her quarter-deck.

"What ship is that?"

"The British frigate *Trojan*—what is left of her," was the melancholy response from the only official-looking figure among the forlorn group on view.

Frank Freeway's heart gave an exultant leap, and the privateer's crew, who were by this time thoroughly aware of his personal affair as being

a strong motive governing the conditions of the cruise, burst into a ringing cheer.

"What ship is that?" came the counter-hail in the same melancholy tone.

"The American privateer *Sea Wraith*!"

There was something of a stir among the men on the wreck, and this was followed by an instant and earnest appeal to be taken off.

This was done as soon as practicable, and the investigation that followed was of a most interesting nature.

CHAPTER XVIII.

SOUTHWARD HO!

THE castaways were twelve in number, including a single commissioned officer, a young midshipman, and all were sufficiently grateful at being relieved from their perilous predicament by even an American and such a terror of the waves as the *Sea Wraith* had already become notorious for being.

Their story was soon told.

The frigate was being pretty badly used up in a hard fight she was having with two vessels, an American sloop-of-war and a French corvette, when the storm had put an end to hostilities, and finally left the *Trojan* the rudderless and dismantled wreck that she now appeared.

She was, moreover, badly aleak, with many of her stout timbers hopelessly sprung, and must soon go down.

She had been systematically abandoned, the midshipman and jury-crew being alone left on board in the possibility of their falling in with some other Britisher willing and able to make the attempt of taking her in tow for what the attempt might be worth.

"Was Lord Oldcourt among your officers?" demanded Frank, as the first question following upon these vital particulars.

"No, sir," replied the disconsolate midshipman, who was an agreeable young Englishman withal, giving his name as Horner. "He had quitted us the week before, to take command of our crack sloop-of-war, the *Battle Queen*."

"The young lady—"

"She went with him, sir," replied the young man, coloring, for he had before this begun to understand the delicacy of the personal situation. "You, I presume, sir," very respectfully, "are Captain Freeway, Miss Heartwell's betrothed?"

"Yes."

"Well, sir," quite earnestly, "I can tell you this much: The young lady will be in no danger of suffering the slightest indignity, even though restrained of her liberty by Lord Oldcourt."

"What do you mean by that?" demanded the master-privateersman, sharply.

"Just this, sir," boldly: "That Lieutenant Oldcourt had systematically misrepresented the feelings of the young lady to his commander and brother officers, and that there wasn't one of them that didn't reprobate his conduct toward her when all was over and done."

"And yet he was given boats' crews with which to burn up Quogue village in order to repossess her!" bitterly.

"Lord Oldcourt is a nobleman and a duke's nephew on the maternal side, to say nothing of his interest with the admiralty board," replied the midshipman, significantly.

"Hah! The English of it, you would say?"

"Have it that way, if it pleases you, sir," quietly. "But of this you can rest assured: Even apart from his lordship's hope of honorably winning the young lady to wife, he will not dare, I think, to treat her with other than the most exceeding respect—no, not on his own ship, the *Battle Queen*, nor even among those with whom he may be brought in contact."

Frank Freeway was more comforted by these assurances than he permitted to appear, though something in the young officer's last words revived his anxiety.

"Explain your words, sir," he exclaimed. "Oldcourt is off, I understand, for Jamaica and an extensive cruise in the Spanish Main."

"That is true."

"To hunt down Americans and Frenchmen?"

"Or pirates, as the case may be; and perhaps to capture or treat especially with Florine Floramour, the Female Buccaneer."

Frank started, and without noticing that the young officer flushed strangely while pronouncing the concluding words.

The personage named was a woman of remarkable personality and romantic history, a last descendant of buccaneering forefathers, and piratical sea-queen in her own individuality, widely famous at that period alike for her beauty and her alleged barbarities throughout the Eden-islets of the Antilles and elsewhere.

"Florine Floramour?" repeated Frank, half to himself, and in a startled tone.

"Yes."

"But what of that terrible woman in this connection?"

"Report has it that Lionel Oldcourt was at one time, and briefly, her lover, that is all," replied Horner, a stern look coming into his blooming English face.

There was food enough for after-reflection in all this, and Frank abstained from continuing

the topic, which, moreover, seemed little to his prisoner's taste.

The privateer lay by the wreck until the sea had subsided, and then set fire to her, after appropriating great quantities of her provisions and stores, together with such of her armament as could be made available.

Among the latter was a complete apparatus for the heating and charging of red-hot shot, of which the gallant rover was destined to make important use thereafter.

The privateer was then once more put upon her southern course, and, thanks to the information thus unexpectedly received, with a more definite chief object as the guiding motive of her cruise.

The midshipman and his companions accompanied her, and there was little doubt in their minds, at least, that their whilom shipmates of the unfortunate *Trojan* must have deserted her but to find a watery grave.

Good winds and comparatively fair weather, but poorer fortune in the way of fresh adventure, attended the schooner for five days following, during which she made a capital run.

At the end of the fifth day, however, when a hundred miles off Charleston, she captured and burnt two transports in ballast, and on the next day after that, a fine British West Indiaman, with a valuable cargo, which was dispatched for Savannah with a prize-crew, together with the prisoners secured on the three vessels alluded to, as well as those who had been taken off the wreck, with the single exception of the midshipman, who was permitted to remain on the privateer at his particular request.

Hardly had this business been dispatched when the faint sound of cannonading was heard far to seaward, and the course altered accordingly.

"If it might only prove to be the *Battle Queen*!" exclaimed Frank Freeway, half to himself, and with a glad leap at heart.

But the young Englishman, Horner, who chanced to overhear the words, shook his head.

"Hardly possible, I think," he said. "Oldcourt's sloop-of-war should be far to the south of us, barring her having been seriously interrupted."

A friendliness had already been partly established between the two young men, who were somewhat similar in their tastes and characters, but something in the Britisher's tone rather grated upon Frank just now.

"You speak as if you wished it so," he said. "Still, how can I blame you?"

"You are right, and you are wrong, Captain Freeway," replied the midshipman. "I could not wish you to overhaul and engage the *Battle Queen* just yet awhile, but on grounds that you might not disapprove were you to know them."

"Why not let me know them now?"

Horner flushed, regarding him with the strange look that Frank had puzzled over more than once before.

"I somehow can't do it till we are fairly in the tropics," he answered. "Pray, bear with me, my kind friend. There is a young lady in your case?"

"Of course, there is."

"Well, so there is in mine."

The young commander did not pursue the subject, though before this he had suspected that the young Englishman might have met and grown enamored of the perilous beauty, Florine Floramour, the Female Buccaneer.

The cannonading had rapidly grown more distinct, for the *Wraith* was on her prime sailing points, with a rather stiff northwest wind on her port quarter.

Later on the smoke of a sea-battle in active progress became visible on the horizon, and presently the best pairs of long-range eyes aboard, as represented by Seth Stratton and Uncle Bob Blowlock, made out that it was a large man-of-war being attacked by two somewhat smaller ones.

Stratton had been made second mate, which had increased the already existing jealousy between the two men, who were of about the same age, and perhaps equally experienced seamen.

"How do you make them out now, Seth?" demanded Frank, turning to Stratton, who was bringing his glass to bear from time to time.

"A Frenchman, and doubtless a corvette, for the bigger craft," replied the old sailor, still at the leveled tube; "and a big brig and a small frigate, perhaps a thirty-gunner, both British."

Here there was a toot from Uncle Bob's boatswain's whistle, and the old fellow came stumping aft, with a battered old telescope under his arm, which when last on shore he had unearthed from somewhere among his lockers of the past.

"Hev been studyin' the sitiuation, sir," he said, touching his hat with the ironical obsequiousness that was now his custom with his prospective nephew-in-law, and with a sidelong scowl for the second mate.

"Go ahead, then," replied Frank, a little wearily.

"A French sloop-of-war havin' it out, nip an' tuck, with two hulkin' Britishers, a brig an' undersized frigate," reported Uncle Bob, with vast self-importance.

"Yes, yes," impatiently. "Stratton has already reported pretty much the same thing."

CHAPTER XIX.

THE SMOKE OF BATTLE.

UNCLE BOB glared, while Stratton turned away to Knowlesby and Horner with a slight smile, the professional jealousy being almost altogether on the other side.

"Adzactly the same, Cap'n Frank, eff I may be permitted to ask?" continued the boatswain, with a sniff and a snort, which he doubtless intended as an exhibition of cold and sarcastic scorn.

"Almost—a corvette engaged with a brig and a small frigate," replied young Freeway.

"Corvette?" fairly yelled Blowlock. "Bung-holes an' butcher-knives! corvette?"

Seth eyed him with grave contemptuousness, while the others were on the broad grin.

"Yes, yes, yes!" said Frank.

"But I said sloop!" with another yell.

"So you did."

"An' corvette, eh?" the old fellow here began to caper, with his iron hook to the side of his nose. "Ramrods an' reef-tops! air they sech a bloke of a deck-swarber board this ship," with a fresh and scornfully-bilious scowl for the second mate's special delectation, "as don't know a sloop-of-war from a corvette?"

"There's no difference at all, Uncle Bob, only in armament-grade," here interposed Stratton, good naturedly. "You're out."

"What?" with a sputtering shout.

"It is true," put in Horner, as a naval expert, and with difficulty restraining his laughter. "A corvette is simply the largest sloop-of-war, of twenty guns or somewhat less."

"Hey?"

"Just so, boatswain. Just as a frigate is any double-decker between a corvette and a ship of the line—most frigates being from twenty-eight to forty-four guns."

There was an *ex-cathedra* quietness in this announcement not to be lightly disputed, notwithstanding the distastefulness of its source.

"As a matter of course," said Frank. "Better step forward again, boatswain, though we're obliged to you for the good intentions of your report—such as it is."

"Hey?"

And then, somewhat dazed, Uncle Bob went stamping back to quarters, but wagging his head resentfully while muttering an incoherent jumble about the "ongrateful quarter-deck jills" of prospective nephews-in-law, and the "olasted impudence of a gun-room buzz fly of a British middy as would presume to lay down naval law to them as was grown gray in sea-fightin' of all sorts."

The engagement that had called forth the comical dispute had been first sighted at an early hour of the morning, and before midday the privateer was within gunshot, with the details of the situation plainly in view.

"The Frenchman is plainly getting the worst of it," said Captain Freeway, "and we're gunning for Britishers, anyway. Order the boatswain to pipe to quarters, Mr. Stratton," whose watch it was, "and we'll give 'em a raking shot or two for outside music."

He also ordered the furnace for heating shot to be got in readiness in case of an emergency.

As a first result, the Wraith let go with her bow-chaser, in coming about within short two-mile range of the frigate, which was nearest her, and with which the Frenchman was most desperately engaged.

The shot was one of Beaumanoir's brilliant successes, completely raking the enemy's spar-deck with fine effect.

Then the rover wore in yet closer, letting go repeatedly with her incomparable stern-gun, while coming slowly into the wind, and with uniform disastrous effect for the Britisher.

A cheer was heard from the Gallic cock, who now began to more than hold her own with her chief adversary single-handed, as the brig was seen to at once put about with the evident intention of devoting herself exclusively to the intermeddling American.

But nothing could have been more satisfactory to the latter, though at close quarters she might have well been overmatched by the brig's superior armament, though the affair was somewhat evened up by the Britisher having already suffered considerably aloft, and by the peerless sailing qualities of the Free Lance of the waves.

In the side issue that presently ensued, and which lasted but little more than an hour, the brig was consequently battered at leisure by her opponent at long range, without being able to inflict any return punishment with her twenty-four and eighteen pounders; and finally a very lucky shot was seen from the Wraith's deck to dismantle the only remaining sound gun on the brig's starboard broadside.

Besides, the latter was by this time all but helpless on the water, with her wheel knocked to pieces and half her upper works in flying rags and tatters.

Then the privateer bore in upon her, like a white-winged angel of destruction, pumping out shot from her bow-piece as she did so, and with a victorious cheer from her crowded deck.

They were at this time nearly ten miles to leeward of the larger contestants, which were keeping up their sea-duel unintermittently, at comparatively short range, and with the corvette seemingly getting the worst of it.

"What ship is that?" was the hail from the rover's deck.

"His Britannic Majesty's brig-of-war Lanarkshire," was the sullen response. "What craft is that?"

"American Letter-of-Marque SEA WRAITH Strike that flag!"

"All right," reluctantly while the brig's flag was slowly run down accordingly. "Send your boats. We're in a bad way."

There was too much sea on for the privateer to lay on with grapnels, so that, in response to this rather pitiful appeal, three boats were at once lowered away, and put off fairly crammed with men to render such assistance as might be needed.

The English midshipman, Horner, who had been studying the brig's decks intently with a borrowed glass, placed his hand upon the young commander's when the boats were about midway across the brief interval between the two vessels.

"Recall your boats, I beg of you, sir!" he said, earnestly. "There is danger of treachery."

"Danger! treachery?" echoed Frank, in astonishment. "Why, the brig has struck her colors!"

"No matter. I recognize as her commander on her poop yonder Old Sarpier, as they call him, the most unscrupulous fighter in the British Navy. It is notorious that he once sunk an unsuspecting Danish ship of superior force, after striking his own flag in order to get her well and unprepared under his guns. Besides, don't you perceive how imperceptibly the Lanarkshire has been coming about, so that her sound broadside is already almost fully presented to you?"

The young man spoke with hurried agitation, as if reluctantly according this extraordinary information at the expense of inward struggle with his national prejudices.

But young Freeway only stared.

"Preposterous! I never heard of such a thing in civilized warfare," he exclaimed, while signing to Stratton to approach—Knowlesby, the first mate, having gone in command of the foremost boat. "Look here, Seth. This is the strangest warning that Mr. Horner is giving me, though doubtless with the kindest intentions in the world, and—"

He was interrupted by a flash along the brig's entire length, as her entire broadside was delivered, just as had been warned, with terrible effect.

Two of three boats were instantly knocked to pieces, the third riddled, while the Wraith's foretopmast was shot away, four of her broadside guns dismounted, and seven men killed outright amidsthips in less time than it has taken to tell it.

The treachery was so unexpected and disastrous that for the moment all was confusion and all but panic on board the victimized privateer.

"Down with the helm and wear her out!" roared Frank, springing to the taffrail in a white wrath. "Clear away forward, man the remaining boats to the rescue, and pay out before the wind. That's the music. Now those heated cannon-balls, Mr. Beaumanoir. Curse the cowardly hound! we'll blow her to Tophet, and not leave a man of 'em to tell the tale!"

CHAPTER XX.

WIPING OFF A SCORE.

THE vociferated orders of the justly infuriated young privateersman were acted upon with surprising energy, while his fierce spirit of resentment seemed to dissipate the confusion that had prevailed, but a moment before as if by magic.

The boats were lowered to the rescue with a run, and scarcely had their oars taken the water before the gallant schooner was up and away around the treacherous hulk's stern like a veritable spirit of retributive vengeance.

The brig's villainous commander had, doubtless hoped to sink his foeman with the one broadside, and at all events could hardly have anticipated the swift penalty that was in store for him.

Before his broadside could be recharged, the Fiend had raked him fore and aft with hers, and as the shot thrown were red-hot, in less than a minute the deservedly doomed craft was on fire in twenty places.

Another and yet another was poured into her in rapid succession, the schooner almost spinning around in her own length to make the alternations as the wind freshened.

In five minutes every gun on the brig's deck was seen to be dismounted, with officers and crew in a panic, and in five more she twined with tongues of fire.

And yet her dastardly commander had the hardihood to spring into her main rigging, with a wild face, and bellow out exultingly:

"Don't you see that we have struck?"

"So have we—for better wages!" was Frank

Freeway's merciless reply, while his parting broadside, with cold metal, seemed to tear off the entire starboard quarter of the self-accused war-craft. "The devil burn you for the hound that you are! if you can turn pirate at convenience, we can meet you like privateersmen every time."

The boats could be seen by this time to have effected the rescue of their struggling comrades, and to be making back for the schooner.

At this juncture, however, old Seth Stratton laid his hand on the angry young commander's shoulder.

"The commander was alone responsible, Frank," he said, in his deep voice. "Don't roast 'em all on his account."

Frank glanced at Horner, whose face was white with agitation over the awful prospect for his countrymen on the brig.

"For your sake, if for none other!" he exclaimed, grasping the midshipman's hand. "You would have saved us from that hound's dastard treachery if you could."

The order was accordingly given, and, as the schooner wore out, a couple of shots from her Long Tom, delivered between wind and water, caused the burning craft to fill rapidly by the stern, while her sides were dotted and streaked with men jumping overboard.

But the saving clause was too late for all.

The next instant the brig's magazine exploded, and she was blown into fragments.

Thirty or forty survivors were picked up by the boats, but of the remainder of her ship's company, over a hundred men, not a trace was left.

Nine men of the privateer's boat's-crews had been killed or drowned by the brig's treacherous broadside, which had been so appallingly avenged.

With all on board, the Wraith at once headed away for the unequal contest still going on between the corvette and the frigate, and in less than two hours she was pouring hot shot into the latter with a vigor and effect that soon set her on fire and gave the victory into the Frenchman's hands.

The latter proved to be the eighteen-gun corvette La Gloire, while the prize thus luckily given to her was the British frigate Hurricane, a full forty-four-gun double-decker, of more than three hundred men, and many had been killed and wounded on both sides.

Lingering but briefly for the French commander's thanks, the free rover of the seas once more spread her white wings, and, healing her battle-wounds while on the wing, fled southward on her mission of vengeance and of love.

The capture of a large and varied number of prizes, however, interrupted her from time to time, scarcely forty-eight hours elapsing at any period without one or more coming within the fatal scope of her aerial and merciless drag-net of the waves.

Finally, it was not until late in November that the bold privateer, after an opening career of unparalleled success and an occasional stoppage at an island for fresh provisions, found herself hovering in the vicinity of Jamaica, in the hope of getting definitely upon Lord Oldcourt and his sloop-of-war, though at the imminent peril of running under the guns of one or more of the great British frigates cruising thereabouts.

However, on the last day of the month named she picked up a small fishing-craft from Kingston, from whose inmates she learned of the departure of the Battle Queen for Curacao on the preceding week.

Altering her course accordingly, the privateer had the good fortune, three days thereafter, of recapturing a large French barque, which had been made a prize by the Battle Queen herself the previous week, and was proceeding northward in charge of a prize-crew.

This vessel, besides having a valuable cargo, was crowded with British prisoners, American and French sailors, nearly all of whom at once joined the privateer's ship's company, which had by this time become greatly reduced through the number of prizes that she had been compelled to man and dispatch northward during her cruise.

This vessel, the Bellefonte, was in charge of a rollicking English middy, who, just as soon as he stepped, a prisoner, over the privateer's rail, rushed up to his fellow-countryman, Horner, with a merry greeting.

"Hallo, Horner!" he cried. "You in quod, too?"

"How are you, Bagley?" responded the mid-dy, less exuberantly pleased at the meeting, it would seem. "Yes, our Yankee skipper here has had me in limbo for a long time. What others of our old messmates were with you on the Battle Queen?"

And then, as the pair took themselves off to exchange confidences in private, he made a sign to Frank, as much as to say "Leave it to me I can find out more from him than you could."

Mr. Midshipman Jem Bagley was an exceedingly happy-go-lucky and breezy young fellow, who was not long in making himself almost as much a favorite as Horner had become, though there was a sentimental seriousness in the lat-

ter's character with which he could have little sympathy.

"To be sure, one prefers to sail under one's own colors," observed this barum-scarum little king's officer, with roystering philosophy. "But, apart from that, I'd as lief take my chances with your privateering dare-devils, for a change, as anywhere else, provided there are lots of pretty Creoles and jig-water. Tra-la! That was the rub for us fellows on the Battle Queen. So long as his lordship could fetch and carry for his beautiful American—who, between you and me and the capstan-head, doesn't care as much for him as for perhaps some other chap's finger-nails—he seemed to think that the rest of us were no more susceptible than so many blocks and stocks. Was there ever heard of such a thing as an extra grog ration on the sloop? Deuce a sniff! And when we middies were allowed ashore, it was only with the old hunk of a first lieutenant along, like so many boarding-school misses with their preceptress in a Yorkshire country-road. Tra-la! But I'm for the sparkle of life. That's your sort, my American friends!"

As was perhaps but natural, the new-comer soon became a special favorite with old Ironhook, the boatswain, who was chief custodian of the Wraith's before-mast grog, besides taking a strong liking to the young fellow on general principles.

"A likely young gentleman, though not much bigger than a quartern measure, to be sure!" commented Uncle Bob to his mates. "Guns an' grapeshot! what a cryin' pity that he's British, instead of pure white, a low an' aloft!"

CHAPTER XXI.

ON THE BATTLE QUEEN'S TRACK.

"OLD COURT is treating the young lady very respectfully, sir," Horner reported to the privateer's master at the first opportunity. "He secured a maid for her at Bermuda."

Frank made a savage gesture. Even after this lapse of time, the mere thought of Jessie in his rival's power exasperated him to little short of madness.

"What else have you learned?" he demanded. "Is there any chance of our getting definitely on the Battle Queen's track?"

"Yes, my friend, I think so most decidedly. On quitting Kingston, it was an open secret that she was bound for the Caribbees."

"Hail definite, indeed! An archipelago extending over eight hundred miles of blue water!"

"True, Frank. But, apart from this bald information, I happen to have my own reasons for knowing just what island-nest of the Caribbees Oldcourt will be most likely to head for."

"You know that?"

"To a moral certainty."

"What spot is it?"

"Torremento, or Lost Island."

"Can you locate it on the chart?"

"Approximately, yes; though it would scarcely be named on any chart. The spot's name in English is significant of its seclusion. Torremento is a mystery of the sea, and—"

He hesitated gloomily.

"Ah! and something else?"

"Yes; the pirate-nest or island lair of Florine Floramour, the last of the buccaneers."

"And you think Oldcourt would carry Miss Heartwell thither?"

"I do."

"Come into the saloon."

And Frank led him to where they could study the chart at leisure.

The young Englishman, after a painstaking examination, made a pencil-point on the uninterrupted ocean-track several hundred miles to the southeast of Barbadoes, seemingly in the very heart of the little-explored tropic seas.

"There, or just about there, you are," he said.

"That is Torremento, or Lost Island, the last of the old buccaneer retreats, where Florine Floramour still reigns as pirate-queen."

"You have been to the spot?"

"Yes."

And Horner colored.

"What is there secret or mysterious about the island, then?"

"Well, mighty few honest men have ever visited it of their own accord, and that's the truth. I only know of one other besides myself and that was Oldcourt," somewhat savagely.

"Ah! But what could serve to keep the island so unknown at large—an ocean-secret?"

"Earthquakes and the mirage."

"What?"

Frank looked up at his companion, incredulously.

"It is true, my dear Freeway," continued the midshipman, with much seriousness. "While the mysterious island, with its attendant reefs and islets, seems seldom, if ever, disturbed itself, the bottom of the surrounding seas for hundreds of leagues is subject to frequent and astounding upheavals, which are most probably communicated to other islands and the continental mainland far away."

"There is a shock or thrill, perhaps, under your ship's keel, and you are lifted on the crest of a sudden ground-swell from the Lord only knows how many fathoms down, that tops the

surrounding ocean in a veritable mountain of brine. These tidal or earthquake waves are of frequent and startling occurrence. New islands—submerged mountain-peaks thrust up from the waves—slowly rise and subside again, or, perhaps, remain for the coral insects to build around and upon, to evolve into some fresh tropic Eden-islet of the far-distant future.

"And, through it all, Torremento remains firm and unmoved, as if firmly and forever anchored upon individual rock-ribs that alone laugh to scorn these fluctuating spasms of the globe's fiery pulse. Like the peaceful heart-core in the bosom of the whirlwind, it blossoms and flowers undisturbed, though nestled in unrest, and cradled round by an ocean that knows no permanent peace."

"Then there is the mirage, or heat-shimmer, from that super-heated tract of torrid seas, that may or may not have some association with the volcanic energies breathing up from the ocean-floor. It is, nevertheless, quite as frequent an appearance as the water-quakes themselves, and gives birth to the cheating mist-mirrorings or mirages which serve to keep the substantiality of the island's existence so much of a secret from the maritime world."

"But this sounds more like a tale of enchanted seas than a reality," commented the young commander.

"It is no exaggeration, or extravagance, Captain Frank," continued Horner, "as you will doubtless have an opportunity to judge for yourself. For I take it that you will not think of delaying your pursuit of the perfidious Oldcourt and his ship."

"Not for an instant," energetically, "though he were bound for the gateway of Hades itself, and though a hundred enchanted pirate isles were to spring up to shut him away."

"Ah, of course not."

"But tell me something more of this mysterious island. Is it large or small?"

"I hardly know that. A cluster of mountain-peaks of everlasting verdure, ringed by coral reefs, and embosomed in the loveliest of seas."

"I have abstained from questioning you closely of your personal experience thereabouts, Horner."

"Thank you for doing so, my friend. I shall do my best to pilot you, at all events."

"Is there a pirate community?"

"Yes, and a considerable one—a wild, fearless and motley race, the last of the buccaneering communities of long, long ago."

"And this strange woman, Florine Floramour, of whom such romantic tales are told—"

"Is her wild people's queen, her word their law, her will their homage, her person their adoration?"

"Humph! The woman is doubtless exceptionally attractive, then?"

"Attractive? She is the most beautiful, the most fascinating creature on God's earth!" exclaimed the young officer, with gloomy enthusiasm.

Frank Freeway smiled a little pityingly. With Jessie Heartwell's gracious blonde image so ineffaceably in his heart, and the shrined goddess of his imagination, he could, however, afford to be indulgent of such extravagance in another.

"What craft has the Female Buccaneer with which to keep up this lingering prestige?"

"A small schooner, and several yet smaller craft—all more or less on the Malay proa principle, and as fleet as the wind itself. Indeed, I doubt if even your witch of a schooner could overmatch any one of them in the light, fluctuating winds of those mysterious seas."

"Floramour—flower of love!" repeated the young commander, half to himself. "An odd enough name for a pirate queen!"

"Yes; I've often thought of it. She is of French extraction, I suppose. The original buccaneers, or *filibustiers*, were such, you know. However, a savage and mongrel enough crowd now, the lot of 'em!"

"And Oldcourt, you think, would intrust Miss Heartwell to such company?"

"I do think so. You see, she would be thus kept, he would argue, safely enough from your pursuit. And then, as he will necessarily look for hard fighting ahead, the cabin of a sloop of war would hardly remain an agreeable abiding-place for a young lady of refinement."

"Nor the island fastness of a corsair queen, either, for that matter!" growled Frank, setting his teeth hard. "However, I can bide my time."

And then he turned to his companion inquiringly, adding: "Why do you regard me so oddly, Horner?"

"Was I doing so?" with a slight start and change of color.

"Yes," curiously. "And you are doing so again; and it isn't for only the present time I've noticed it, either."

The midshipman smiled strangely.

"My answer should be complimentary to you, Frank," said he—"that is, in a personal way."

"But what is it?"

"Your face always unaccountably reminds me of hers."

"Of whose?"

"Of Florine Floramour's."

"Hullo! a family resemblance?"

"No and yes; I don't know. A suggestion, rather than a resemblance. May I ask you a rather impertinent question?"

"Of course—for it couldn't be very impertinent, as coming from you, old fellow."

"Might there be something mysterious or unexplained in your own past?"

"Yes."

Here a sail was reported on the port bow, and the conversation was abruptly ended.

The sail proved to be an insignificant British trader from Porto Rico for Kingston, and so satisfactory was a certain piece of intelligence she voluntarily furnished that she was permitted to proceed on her voyage unmolested.

This was to the effect that, four days previous and a hundred leagues to the eastward, she had communicated with the sloop-of-war Battle Queen, lazily becalmed, and with her tops undergoing repairs from a severe squall encountered on the previous day.

"Well, we're in the region and season of white squalls," Midshipman Horner had observed, reflectively. "Yes, and of tornadoes, too!"

"No matter," the Privateersman Prince had responded, a glitter of satisfaction in the confident glance that he threw aloft and aloft, as the Sea Wraith, with every stitch drawing, careened away upon her life-like course, with the freshening trade wind on her port quarter. "We are dead on our enemy's track, God be praised!"

But Mr. Midshipman Bagley, who was making a wry face over a particularly weak glass of grog with the boatswain forward at the time, and had been further dispirited by a delicate intimation that the stock of liquors was running alarmingly short, looked after the disappearing trader with other and less jovial emotions.

"And she's from Porto Rico, just think of it, Mr. Blowlock!" he sighed, regretfully. "Porto Rico! next to Jamaica itself, the land of rum and molasses, the paradise of jig water! and that blasted trader like enough just stuffed with full casks to the very hatches! Oh, Lord! and to be let to slip off in this scandalous way, with our last cask of the rosy on tap, as you sorrowfully admit! It's against reason, it's against true privateering principles! and if I wasn't a king's officer in captivity—however, here's still looking toward you, old chap!"

"True for you, Mr. Bagley," growled Uncle Bob, with something more than his accustomed discontent. "But, boardin'-pikes an' tommerhorks! what kin ye expect—Howsomever, my son, eff some one else, as I may be too modest to mention by name, was a-commandin' this 'ere sea-flyer, 'stead o' some one as mebbe 'll one day be Uncle Bob Blowlock's nephew-in-law, an' mebbe won't—but I'm not a grumbler, my boy, understan' thet distinctly. An' here's another nail inter your coffin, my hearty!"

"Yes, thank you, Mr. Blowlock," regretfully, as the glasses clinked, "but a light one, a very light one, as you must admit—hardly more than a tack, for that matter."

The schooner continued her free run uninterrupted for several days, and then herself had a wrestle with a brief, fierce squall, only to find herself helplessly becalmed in the lazy, windless ground-swell that succeeded it, such as alternate with the fitful gustiness of that treacherous latitude in the latter autumn of the year, usually as forerunners of much more dangerous weather.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE CASTAWAY.

THE calm lasted but a day and night, however, and then, while the schooner began to get under way before a very light continuance of the trade-wind, a speck was sighted on the eastern horizon that old Seth Stratton presently announced, after a long observation with the telescope, as an open boat with a single occupant.

So it proved upon a nearer acquaintance—a small open boat, without sail or oar, its inmate burned almost to blackness by the terrible sun, a pitiabie object generally, and seemingly at his last gasp.

However, he was a tough fellow, and he began to revive very speedily after being carried under the Wraith's deck-awning and having his case promptly ministered to.

At this juncture Midshipman Horner caused a sensation by rushing up to the sufferer, scrutinizing his bronzed and blistered features, and grasping him by the shoulder.

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed; "Dolores Spagolletto's lover, as I live!"

"Hullo!" ejaculated Frank Freeway, interestedly, while rollicking Mr. Midshipman Bagley, who was fanning the castaway with a gigantic palm-leaf, allowed in an audible undertone that "Horner must know everybody."

"Pitchforks an' gridirons!" observed Uncle Blowlock, while mixing a fresh pannikin of rum and canteen-cooled water for the unfortunate's benefit, "the poor devil is anybody's lover just now. I should say, by the look of his figure-head."

The man looked somewhat stupidly around

him, and then with slowly-brightening eyes as he noticed Horner in particular.

"Aha! the little comrade Ingleze of a long time back," he muttered, in a species of mongrel patois that few but the young man addressed could understand, and extending his hand. "What! would the devil's daughter, Capitano Florine, permit your blue eyes out of her sight this long, or—but wait!" He pressed his hand across his brow. "I wander, my head, my head. *Diablo!* where am I, anyway?"

And then, with a parting draught at the panikin, he relapsed into a stupor.

At a sign from Horner, Frank ordered the man to be carried into the airiest cabin-berth, and to be kindly cared for.

An hour later, Smith Flannigan, the ex-mail-carrier, who had joined the privateer at Quogue, and, from his smattering of physic and surgery, had been forthwith installed as ship's doctor, reported the man to be in something of a fever, but recuperating rapidly.

Not long after that, Frank was joined on deck by Horner, who had constituted himself as the castaway's special attendant from the first.

The young man looked at him inquiringly, and with a curious smile.

"And how is Dolores Spagoletto's lover by this time?" he asked.

"That is what I am come to tell you about," was the grave reply. "He is improving. My friend, there is this to tell:

"I visited Torremonto three years ago—Lord Oldcourt putting in an appearance somewhat later on, after which," hurriedly and as if in pain, "I was nothing more to her.

"Dolores Spagoletto was her favorite, her *confidante*, among the women of the corsair community.

"This man, Pierre Vallette—"

"Ah, our castaway, eh?"

"Yes. He was even then Dolores's lover, or wanted to be, but had been—some one's else."

"Probably Captain Florine's lover, in the first place? Is that it?"

"Something like it—though favorite, or pet slave, or pet dog would describe the thing better. By the way, my friend, don't fall into the vulgar error that most do. The Floramur may be cruel, heartless, ruthless—though even this is only alleged of her; but as a woman she is as ice—pure as the unspotted snow."

Young Freeway stared, but merely nodded his response.

"I ought to know," continued Horner, bitterly. "So ought some one else, though he seemed to come nearer to touching her heart—if she has such a thing—than probably any man in the world. Oldcourt would have gladly married her, if she would have consented. And so would I, for that matter," wildly. "Stare, if you like, it is the truth. La Floramur is greedy for the homage, the worship, the idolization of men, but for nothing more."

The young commander was silent for a moment. His wolfish animosity against Oldcourt deepened almost to insupportableness. This the man, to have wooed, and wooed in vain, this pirate witch, a woman perhaps stained with a hundred crimes, and now to have that pure beach-lily of the sea-beat Long Island Coast in his power, whereof to make his second bridal venture, if such could be! However, he mastered all outward expression of his internal fury.

"Well, well, Horner," he at last said, a little impatiently, "all this is romantic and interesting enough. But our castaway, you know?"

"True; and his present story is to be taken with the greatest caution."

"Why?"

"A good fellow, but notorious as the greatest liar in Torremonto. That was three years ago, but such a habit is not apt to improve with time."

"What is his present yarn?"

"That Captain Floramur sent him adrift, three days ago, from her schooner, La Caracalla."

"Preposterous! Why, one full day of such a sun as we snatched him from under this morning would have burnt, baked and shriveled him up like a chip."

"I should say so! Yet, in support of his far-rago, he swears that the two preceding days were cloudy, with rain."

"Which we know to have been just the reverse, the only interruption being that white squall which preceded the calm, and a rainless one at that."

"Of course, but it seems to please this romancing pirate to think that he is winning your credulity."

"We may make something out of him. What does he say he was set adrift for?"

"Ha, ha, ha! He surpasses himself there. For alleged insubordination, you understand, but really because La Floramur was wild with jealousy by reason of his having finally and indubitably transferred his affections to the Spagoletto!"

"Ah, well; but does he really know anything worth our knowing?"

"Like enough, if we could only get at it."

"Where was the pirate queen bound for when he was set adrift?"

"A hundred knots to the east."

"Had she fallen in with the Battle Queen?"

"Pierre says not. Besides, it would have been unlikely, the schooner having probably been far to southward of the sloop's course."

"True. Then there is nothing but to keep an eye upon this fellow."

On the following day, the wind having somewhat freshened, the Sea Wraith broke the monotony of her south-sea cruise by making a prize of a fine Glasgow merchantman, bound for Jamaica with a full cargo of hardware and breadstuffs, which was dispatched for New Orleans with as small a prize crew as could navigate her, and with her officers and men in custody.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A SEA OF SURPRISES.

THE next day following, Kelly, the cabin steward, came to Captain Freeway on the quarter-deck, saying:

"May it please your Honor, but it's the devil a bit Oi can get along wid that coffee-colored shpalpeen from the devil's own Nowhere as calls himself Pierre Vallette."

Frank looked at the speaker in some surprise. Since the suspicion made known against him, of having treacherously assisted the big wave to wash his young master overboard, Kelly had been a changed man—strictly, silently, all but mutely attentive to his duties, with seldom a smile or voluntary word for anybody; and all this in strange contrast with his cheerful, exuberant Irish nature as evinced on his first entering upon the service.

"What's the matter with the stranger?" inquired the Sea Wraith's master, somewhat shortly. "And why can't you get along with him, Kelly?"

"It's this shpalpeen Vallette, sir," repeated the steward, accenting the first syllable of the name. "A purty sort of valet he'd make for a gentleman, sir, now w'dn't he?"

"What's the trouble, if there is any? Don't let me ask you again!"

"It's the luk" (look) "av him, your Honor!" nervously. "He's got the bad eye into the head of him."

"Nonsense!"

"Sure, sir, but the luk av him turns me cowl'd at times! The devil looks as if he'd run a knife inter me wid a smile."

"Take care that he doesn't, then. But this is sheer enough nonsense. The man is well-enough behaved, so far as I've noticed, and can't be expected to change his complexion or his eyes at your convenience. However, Blowlock has already given him bunk-quarters forward. That will do, Kelly."

The queer complaint was thus summarily dismissed, and, a very extraordinary change of weather beginning to manifest itself about this time, Frank thought no more of it.

They were now well on into the eastern end of the Caribbean Sea, or Spanish Main, a hundred leagues or so southeast of Porto Rico, and perhaps half as many west of the Windward Islands, otherwise the outward-bending southern half of the great Caribbee or Lesser Antilles chain.

The weather change in process was something more than extraordinary, it was mysterious.

The unruffled sea was like a looking-glass, with long, scarcely-perceptible swells.

The wind, after freshening, had fallen off to very light from the northwest, and a strange, transparent mist or haze was rapidly possessing everything.

One could see through it to vast distances, and yet it tempered the pouring torrid sunshine to a sort of illuminated opalescence, pearly in tint, and seemed to bank up the far horizon all around with a shining, glassy, shimmering wall.

"It's the picture haze, the mirage mist!" observed Horner, who was on the poop-deck with Frank and the mates. "We're passing into the region I spoke of—a veritable sea of surprises."

"A good thing to take in topsails, sir," suggested Knowlesby, who had the watch. "I've been here before, and there's no tellin' what may spring."

"All right," assented Freeway, "though we're hardly making way as it is. Order 'em in." And this was done.

"Blow me tight if I ever see the like!" was the breezy comment of Mr. Midshipman Bagley, who had just stepped aft from amidships. "It looks downright uncanny!" And he again slipped forward, doubtless in the hope of finding Uncle Bob in the mood for a friendly glass in the gun-room.

Here there came a fierce, unaccountable gust from dead to west that caused the schooner to heel along unexpectedly under her freshly-shortened sail, and some one said:

"Good Lord, look at the pirate chap!" meaning Pierre Vallette, the rescued castaway.

The latter—who had not yet been able to make himself liked forward, in spite of his glib and astonishing yarns, or perhaps because of them—was regarding the sea and air from an isolated position near the starboard rail amidships, with a wild look of mingled terror and fascination in his dark Spanish face.

"What can be the matter with the fellow?" observed Frank, watching the man curiously.

"Fright, may be," Horner took it upon him self to reply. "Expectancy, may be."

"Fright?" repeated Frank, incredulously. "But he's an old sailor, and, as being used to these parts, should have witnessed this phenomenon scores of times."

"That's nothing in this sea," replied the midshipman, a little moodily. "It's like one's experience with earthquakes; the more one sees of 'em, the more he is appalled. It's a thing you never get used to."

"True as you're treadin' ship's timber!" interposed Seth Stratton, taking his pipe out of his mouth. "It's my opinion as we're edgin' inter the Sargasso Sea, an' 'f that's the case, we expect almost anything."

Horner smiled and shook his head, while Frank turned to Knowlesby, saying:

"You took the sun last, Knowlesby; what is our position now?"

"About 64 degrees west by 13 degrees 20 minutes south," was the prompt response.

"Good! and even St. Lucia, the nearest of the Windwards, a good hundred leagues to the eastward. We're nothing like within the south-western rim of the great Sargasso swirl as yet, though like enough in for something surprising, as was hinted."

The schooner was still heeling forward with a rush, the fierce gust having been succeeded by a steadier, low-sweeping wind, that was as hot as if from a furnace-mouth.

Scarcely were the words out of the young commander's mouth when there was a shock from somewhere down deep in the glassy abysses, causing a sharp tremor from keelson to truck, as if from the blow of an invisible hammer, and at once the gallant craft began to lift on the summit of a huge, mysterious swell that was absolutely devoid of crest or feathering foam.

"*Temblo! terramote!* the earthquake wave!" shouted Pierre Vallette, rushing aft, his face of a sickly yellowing hue. "*Señors—comandero—cuidado!*" (Sir—captain—look out, have a care!)—"the sea-bottom may be rising up underneath us!"

"Forward again with you!" commanded Freeway, sternly. "Have you taken leave of your senses, man?"

And the Spaniard, or whatever he might be, shrunk back submissively, but with the wild fear intensified in his face and gestures.

"Sail 'ho!" was at the same instant roared from the lookout. "Looks like a big armed brig, and not three knots away on the port bow!"

Such was the fact, to the astonishment of everybody—the vessel indicated coming out of the mist-shine with almost magical distinctness; yes, and with the British Jack at her gaff, her deck covered with men at their quarters.

"Hold on, sir!" suggested Horner, in a brief pause of Frank's shouted commands to have the bow-chaser in readiness and the men piped to quarters; "perhaps it's only a mist-picture, a mirage. Look out there—and there—and there!"

A murmur of amazement rose from the privateer, as he excitedly pointed this way and that.

Ships were all around and everywhere—ships or craft of various rigs and sizes—only, unlike the brig first sighted, they were far away, high up in the air, and seemingly sailing upon nothing!

But, simultaneously with the appearance of this bewildering apparition, there was a flash at the brig's stern, and the thirty-two pound round-shot made a clean hole through the Wraith's mainsail, and passed within a foot of the tallest head on her poop-deck—which happened to be Seth Stratton's—in its hissing plunge over the taffrail rack.

"Have back at her, Beaumanoir!" yelled Frank, rushing forward to where the big chaser was by this time in readiness. "One of 'em at a time will answer for us, and picture-ships don't fire solid shots."

The gun was let go accordingly, but without effect, the schooner having suddenly begun to descend the thither slope of the monster swell.

Another cry of wonder rose, nevertheless, from the privateer.

The brig was seen to start and quiver, even as the schooner had done shortly before, only with much more violence.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A SEA OF SURPRISES.—CONTINUED.

BUT the fact of the armed Britisher being seen to quiver so unexpectedly, just as her adversary had done, as if by an invisible shock from underneath, was not the worst of her hapless fortune.

Instead of rising with an attendant earthquake-wave, she was observed to descend into a vast glassy water-valley, down the league long slope of which the privateer, still with the furnace-hot mysterious wind caressing her, began to career directly toward her with tremendous speed.

The stranger experienced yet another shock, then she seemed fairly to crumble to pieces, there was a forlorn, despairing crowding of white faces and beseeching hands from her crowded

deck, and she went down, as if clutched and dragged under by a titanic hand reaching up from the solemn depths.

But the privateer was still speeding down the water-slope with race-horse speed, and before her inmates could master their horror, there was fresh cause for danger in their own case.

"Four fathoms!" bawled the man who had been set to heaving the lead, as a precaution recommended by Horner.

A pause, and then:

"Three an' a half!—Three fathoms, an' shoal-
ing fast!"

Frank and his companions on the poop-deck looked at each other in blank amazement, while a sort of panicky hush fell upon the crew.

To add to the horrors of the situation, the water on every hand began to smoke, while hundreds of dead and dying fish made their appearance, belly-up, on the surface, with an aspect of being parboiled.

"The sea-bottom's volcano-crest!" yelled the pirate-man, in his half-intelligible lingo, again rushing frantically aft. "Seniors—comandero—to prayers, to repentance! It's rising—rising—I feel it coming up—in another minute we'll be on a mountain-top!"

"Drag that duffer below and clap him in irons!" roared Captain Freeway, with an oath. "Afloat or stranded, aswim or high and dry, there's got to be discipline on this ship while I command her."

"Ay, ay, my hearty!" shouted a voice in response. "Airthquakes an' punkin-pie! that's the tork fur any uncle-in-law to be proud of."

And Uncle Bob, who had promptly come stamping aft, tooting his boatswain's whistle while on the jump, summarily knocked the disturber down with a crack on the crown from his everlasting arm-hook and forthwith dragged him forward out of sight.

"Three fathoms!" again came from the man at the line, while the seemingly devoted craft seemed to fairly hiss down the steep incline of the hollowing sea. "Two an' three quarters! Mark twain, and—"

There was a scraping sound, a slight shivering thrill throughout the speeding fabric of the whole craft, a breathless instant, and then, almost on the breath of doom, she began to rise—not with the expectant shock, nor up the opposite of the water-valley which had swallowed up the brig but a few minutes previous, but buoyantly, exultantly on the summit of a fresh up-springing swell, that spilled her over its crystal, smooth-arching brim, like a glistening foam-bell slipping over a swift-glassed cataract's brink.

"Four fathoms!" cheerily enough now from the lead-heavy under the jib sprit. "Mark six—mark ten—no bottom!"

Then a simultaneous, but sort of awesome cheer—a cheer that had both panic and thanksgiving in it—burst from the racing privateer's deck, and the ex-pirate dropped to his marrow-bones with clasped hands and jabbering lips, while all eyes were turned over the stern.

Yet another cheer, and the submerged peak of the sea-bottom's upheaval rose high, higher and yet higher, smoking, hissing, dripping and cascading out of the secret mile-deep bosom of the sea!

But a cheer that was succeeded by a hush, and then by a sympathetic groan.

Fast-clinging to a jagged tooth or spur of the brief-born mountain-island, there was the crumpled wreck of the foundered Britisher, dismantled and a-tangle as she had met her upspringing cradle in the depths, a gasping shark or two stranded on the smoking rocks about her, and with many a poor drowned corpse in startlingly life-like attitudes, but mostly awash about the guns or in amid the limp, helpless raffle of sails and cordage at wedged stern-post and tilted sides.

"Oh, my God!" sobbed Midshipman Bagley, testifying to his goodness of heart by covering his face and bursting into tears, while Horner's face was also working; "but it's crying sad, crying sad! And doubtless a hundred as good jack-tars an' gun-room messmates as ever tipped can, told a yarn, or double-reefed a bobstay splice!"

But it was only for an instant.

Then the brief-born mountain sunk as it had risen—even far faster—the sea closed over it, doubtless forever, and all was as before.

Not quite, though.

"Look out for'ard—look out fore-an'-aft!" yelled a voice.

And then, the schooner being by this time at the bottom of the water-slope she had been racing down, another water-hill was behind her like a flash, the wind fell off absolutely breathless, while the sea-ascent directly ahead was suddenly sucked up and combed over into such a water-cliff or precipitous overhang as had doubtless never before confronted mortal craft and left it afloat.

"Hold hard!" bawled the young commander, making his own first grab for the tiller-lashings. "It's neck or nothing, and God for us all!"

"Howly Saint Pathrick!" gasped Kelly, who was long since up from below, and, by a strange coincidence or fatality, laying hold of the poop-

combings at the spring of the companionway, just as in the former analogous emergency; "but it's purgatory or kingdom come wid the most av us."

And then the sea was aboard, with a whoop, a roaring hiss and a smothering crush, burying, choking, swallowing everything, out of which it seemed preposterous that anything could issue unmaimed or alive.

But the privateer, it must be remembered, was no common craft.

"All right, my hearty!" it was old Seth Stratton's voice, while old Seth Stratton's iron hand was helping Frank to his feet. "Steady you are!"

"What is it, mate? Are we from under it?" Frank caught his breath, rubbed the water out of his eyes, and looked wildly around.

"Waal, I should say so! But it was a smasher, my boy, a smasher, such as I never want to see or feel again."

"But what was that breaking?" with a less bewildered outlook, that showed the gallant barque still somewhat awash, and with the water cascading furiously through the lee scuppers, but apparently well-breathed from her douse, and without the loss of a man. "I'm sure I heard it."

"Right you are, my hearty—the main-top-mast short off, and down with a run. But, come along, Frank; he's beseeching for speech with ye."

"Who? what?"

But Frank was already at the spot indicated—a group gathered about the poop-combings and companion-rail, and there, prostrate among them, with fast-glazing eyes, his breast-bone smashed in by the splintering fall of the maintop—Kelly, the steward.

The dying man looked up with feeble eagerness, beseeching with a look for the young commander to bend down over him, which was at once complied with.

"Your suspicions were right, sir," gasped Kelly, disjointedly. "Twas meself as cut the—the bight av rope that let ye slip off wid the big say-wave that other toime. It's the devil's retribution that's on me at last!"

"Was it at Lord Oldcourt's behest?" sternly demanded Frank.

"Yis, yis!" yet more painfully. "An' Oi moight have been tempted to thry it ag'in, for it's a t'ousan' poun' down on the nail he promised me for your loife. But a last wur-rd, sir, a last wur-rd, in expiation. The Shpaniard—be-ware av the Shpaniard!"

"What! Pierre Vallette?"

"Yis, yis!"

"But he can't have had communication with Oldcourt on the Battle Queen!" incredulously.

"He's a liar when—he says to the contrary! Oh, Oi c'u'd prove it, if, if—"

But the desired concluding words were never said, the guilty wretch at that juncture yielding up his spirit.

CHAPTER XXV.

A BREATHING SPACE.

A FEW hours later, at the brief funeral services with which the body of the treacherous steward was consigned to the deep, the ghastly wonder-day of that sea of surprises was a thing of the past, like the haunting memory of a vivid nightmare dream.

The phantom picture-ships, even the eerie mist itself that had mirrored them in mirage, had disappeared.

So had the glassy and unnatural turbulence of the earthquake-tortured sea.

The waters were healthfully tossed and ruffled by a free north-wind, frolicking everywhere, in glorious contrast with the furnace-breath of that uncanny gale of such a short time before.

It was a breathing space after such horrors of the tropic deep as have been described, and the brave schooner was once more bounding bird-like over sea-wide course, with repairs already well forward on the main-top, her people merry, and all trim and snug aloft and aloft.

"Produce the Spaniard!"

It was the young commander of the sea-rover, Sea Wraith, that spoke, and in a stern and authoritative tone, at that.

Seated with him, at the long table in the cabin-saloon, where his first officer, Stratton (Knowlesby having the watch on deck) and the two English middies, the latter by courtesy, and Horner, moreover, to interpret what might not be plain in the piratical jargon of the man who was summoned to appear.

A number of open charts and other papers imparted something of an official aspect to the proceedings.

Blowlock, the boatswain, and the tall Long Islander, Jack Jigsby, who had been created boatswain's mate, were the attendants to whom the order was addressed, and they forthwith bustled away.

Then Mr. Smith Flannigan, the erst Sag Harbor, Riverhead and Quogue mail-carrier, also joined the official representation at the long table, in his capacity of ship's surgeon, and the "court" was primed for business.

The Spaniard had been thrust in irons an hour previously, though not at the first excited

order to that effect during the height of the earthquake sensation.

He now, when brought in, appeared both bewildered and sullen, for he could have had no intimation of the charge that was to be brought against him.

"Prisoner, you may be seated," remarked the court, as we shall say.

Vallette took a hitch in the waistband of his clean duck drawers, shuffled his bare feet, and looked curiously on the shackles of his brawny wrists and ankles, without moving, and perhaps without understanding.

"Here, you pirate!" bellowed Uncle Bob, flourishing a drawn cutlass over the man's head with one hand, and his iron hook to like purpose with his redoubtable stump; "squat, flop, down with yer! Boardin'-pikes an' tommerhorks! an' blast your piratical eyes! don't yer know how to come to anchor when ordered by the privateer emperor o' the briny deep?"

And with that, he smashed, bumped and crushed the fellow down into the seat provided, greatly to Mr. Bagley's and Jack Jigsby's half-suppressed hilarity, if little to the enlightenment or comfort of the poor devil chiefly concerned.

"Enough of that, boatswain!" interposed the court, sternly. "Be careful."

"Holy hatch-combin's!" exclaimed old Blowlock, with an injured air; "I wasn't doin' nothin'. I was jest assistin' to keep order in the court, and—"

"Hold your tongue! The court will now proceed to business. Prisoner, the charge against you, briefly, is this."

Frank then tersely stated the charge of lying, treachery and conspiracy against his own person, as he had by this time somewhat methodically formulated it in his own mind from the dying intimations of Kelly, the steward, disjointed and meager as they had been, which Horner at once interpreted into the island jargon with which the prisoner had seemed chiefly familiar.

But the latter had either already improved his lingual powers from his intercourse with the privateersmen, or he had been shamming a stupidity from the outset which he was no longer at pains to maintain.

He looked up quickly and intelligently even before Freeway was through speaking, and then interrupted Horner midway in his translation.

"Diablo, comandero!" he exclaimed, in broken English, which is not here reproduced, but was sufficiently intelligible; "and your little steward charged all this stuff against me, Pierre Vallette?"

"Yes; and perhaps more than you have yet heard."

"He lies!" contemptuously—"lies, without knowing how to lie!" with a certain professional disdain, as one might say. "But, confront me with the blackguard." (The steward's death had been kept a secret from him.) "Let him give me this balderdash to my face."

"The man is dead," said Freeway, impressively. "He made this charge against you with his last breath."

"And went to hell with the lie on his lips."

Vallette had now attained to a confident and even somewhat dignified air, though with something of a swagger in it.

"Why, look you, comandero, this is the veriest idiocy, on the face of it."

"That you will have to prove to our satisfaction."

"Prove what?—that I wasn't set adrift by Capitano Floramour at all, but fell from the moon, instead?"

"No trifling, if you please! But you will have to prove that you were not in prior or subsequent communication with Lord Oldcourt, of the British sloop-of-war Battle Queen, and that you did not then conspire with him against my life, as I have already set forth in my formal charge."

"Good Lord!" in admirably counterfeited amazement, if really counterfeited; "and I, Pierre Vallette, in the condition in which you rescued me—speechless, half-dead, black-blistered by the murderous sun?"

"That has all been considered."

"Diablo!" indifferently; "to the devil with your charges, then, comandero!—though with no disrespect to yourself, for I can't forget that you succored me in my bitter need."

"You do not deny knowing this Oldcourt?"

"I remember him at Torremento, as I did the younger and rosier Ingleeze señor yonder," with a nod toward Horner.

"And you persist that you have not seen Oldcourt since those days?"

"Nor heard of him, either."

"You swear that you were not recently put aboard his ship by Florine Floramour, the Pirate Queen?"

"Swear to it?" with an amused laugh. "Cheerfully and without limit, comandero!"

"Nor were picked up by him subsequently to being abandoned in the open boat by her?"

"Of course—to be sure!" impatiently. "Why, the beautiful blonde young lady herself, could you question her—" he checked himself like lightning.

The privateersman chief smiled a terrible smile.

"What young lady?"

But the ex-pirate was quite his nonchalant self again.

"La Floramour, our *capitano*, to be sure."

"She, I am given to understand," with a glance at Horner, "is not a blonde young lady, but the reverse."

"Comandero," coolly, "you are out of your reckoning, or trusting to false signals. The Floramour may have midnight eyes and hair, but her complexion is as the pearl in its pellucid purity and fairness."

Freeway shook his head sternly, the terrible smile deepening into a terrible frown, as pitiless as doom.

"Besides," continued the prisoner, with a careless shrug of his powerful shoulders, "there is also Dolores Spagoletto, who is *Capitano Florine's* inseparable companion on all her voyages."

"And who is also dark, not fair," interposed Horner.

"Diablo! I've had enough of this riddle."

And the prisoner, settling himself back in his seat, produced the materials for and rolled a cigarette as well as his shackles would permit, while insolently signing to his custodians for a light.

Jigsby grinned, but Uncle Bob fairly boiled over on the instant.

"Blood an' blazes!" howled the boatswain, twisting his hook into the prisoner's shirt-collar and once more waving his cutlass over his head with apparently direful intent; "the impudence of the piratical slob. Only say the word, Cap'n Frank, an' I'll split him down from main-top to keel-metal."

"Stop your infernal din!" exclaimed Frank, furiously; and he then turned to his fellow-occupants of the long table, where Mr. Midshipman Bagley, for one, was writhing and purpling with suppressed cachinnation. "Gentlemen," he continued, "it is the court's opinion that the prisoner stands hopelessly self-involved. What have you to say about it?"

They all agreed with this opinion after a brief whispered conference.

"We find," observed the first mate, as chief spokesman, or foreman of the jury, so to speak, "as how the prisoner stands self-guilty," with oracular gravity, "or, leastways, as how the groun's fer suspicionin' of him is wastly increased."

"That is the unanimous impression of this court. Prisoner, stand up and receive your sentence."

"Up it is!" roared the irrepressible boatswain, cheerfully assisting the prisoner to his feet by a thrust forward that almost pitched him on his face. "Ther law is ther law. *Lex talionis, Ignorantia legis neminem excusat, E pluribus unum, and America's the gem of the ocean!* My Lord High Admiral Freeway," sarcastically, "is the duffer to be hanged at once an' out o' hand, or arter supper!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" exploded Mr. Bagley at last, fairly rolling in his seat, while even the prisoner's hardened indifference relaxed into something suggestive of a smile. "Ho, ho, ho! Haw, haw, haw!"

"Silence!" shouted Frank, thoroughly angry. "Prisoner, it is the sentence of this court that you be kept in close custody on deck for one hour hence. If you make a full confession before the expiration of that period life and leniency will be granted you. If not, you will surely be hanged at our spanker-gaff, and may the Lord, in his infinite mercy, pity and forgive you."

The prisoner was forthwith hustled uncereemoniously on deck.

At that instant, however, there came the roaring report of the privateer's bow-chaser.

Every one hurried on deck.

Another wonderful manifestation had come upon the sea of surprises during the brief session of the "court."

CHAPTER XXVI. COMPLICATIONS.

THE fresh, free wind of an hour previous was still blowing, but from almost anywhere or everywhere.

Dense but small rain-clouds were driving hither and thither across the bright evening sky, or huddling together in strange, threatening groups, while waterspouts, already roped from sky to sea in their queer hour-glass shapes, or in rapid process of formation, were careering everywhere.

"What's in sight?" demanded Frank, with a hasty and somewhat amazed glance around him, as soon as he reached the poop-deck.

For answer, Knowlesby grimly pointed away to the southeast, whence at the same instant there was a flash, a report, the whistle of a round-shot uncomfortably close to its target, and then, looming grandly and bravely from out a network of the spouts less than two miles away, the apparition of a splendid single-decker battle-ship, with the British Union Jack streaming from her mizzen-truck.

For an instant the young commander could

scarcely believe his eyes, and then a great, joyful thrill rushed over him.

"The Battle Queen!" he exclaimed, with a shout. "It must be she!"

Then there was another roaring shot from the bow-chaser, and the privateer began to come about like magic in the fluctuating gale, in order to hold her welcome but formidable antagonist at arm's-length, after her accustomed tactics with a much superior force.

"With scarce a doubt, sir," responded the mate. "And there's something else for us to look out for away back in yonder."

And he again pointed away, this time to the southwest, where the maze of wheeling and tortuous spouts was yet more intricately gathered—in fact, a veritable forest or labyrinth of them.

"Something else in yonder?"

"Ay, ay, sir; but whether sloop, schooner, sea-witch, or but another picture-craft, the juggling cheat of the devil's mirage, it is hard to say. It has several times flitted out and in there, however, whatever it was, like a very ghost-craft, and for the most part as airy and insubstantial looking as the water-spouts themselves."

"Good! You are doing capitally as it is. There isn't much danger from the spouts, I am thinking, they appear so thin-drawn and wavy."

"Not much, sir, though there be one or two of the thicker funnels that I'd hate to have break athwart us amidships. Yes, Mr. Bowmanner, all right at another luff of the wheel."

The last words were to Beaumanoir, the French Canadian gunner, who, with his assistants, was just getting the stern-chaser into position.

Frank turned inquiringly to the English midshipman, as the sloop-of-war was again coming into view after a momentary eclipse among the tangle and twist of the spouts surrounding her.

Young Bagley nodded gravely, in response to the look.

"Yes, Captain Freeway," he said, shortly. "It is the Battle Queen, and no mistake."

Harum-scarum as he might be by temperament, and perhaps with many a personal liking among his present enforced associations, he was exclusively and gallantly English, with his nation's battle-flag in sight.

And so was Horner, for that matter, though in a more modified sense, and with his feelings naturally biased more or less by his jealous hatred of Lord Oldcourt.

Here the Long Tom was let go in superb style, its murderous round-shot plugging the target fairly in the cut-water, with the attendant splintering.

The shot was also seen to have shattered in its passage a considerable spout, with the effect of bringing its exploded rain bag down over the sloop's bows in a smashing cataract.

A cheer from the Wraith's deck, and then, as she sheered swiftly off, kicking up her foam-heels in flouting scorn, the return shot was seen to fall somewhat short.

"This is our game!" exclaimed the Privateersman Prince, jubilantly. "Hold her off just as we are, Knowlesby. The game is then in our own hands, if perhaps a somewhat waiting one, and we can think of dosing her with hot shot at our leisure."

But this fortunate maneuvering could only be kept up in part, by reason of the extraordinary fluctuating nature of the wind.

It was pursued with very average success, however, notwithstanding the apparent anxiety of the big ship to come to closer quarters.

The Wraith's Long Tom continued to do excellent and pretty uniform service during the running, or rather circling, fight that ensued, while napping only one return shot, that disabled a gun of her starboard broadside, while most of the other shots were either short or aimed too low.

At last there was something of an interruption in the interest on board the privateer.

"The witch-craft! the phantom-bark!" cried a dozen voices. "There she is—no—yes, there again!" And the majority of eyes were momentarily diverted to the southwest.

Yes, there, amid the labyrinthine twists and convolutions of the airy, mist-roped funnel-spouts a mile or two away, and with the splendor of the fast-declining tropic sun weaving many a gorgeously-tinted bow and iris among their spraying forms, there, coming and going, appearing and vanishing, was the strange spirit-craft, or so it seemed, of the enchanted sea.

Indistinct, mist-like, and what was it so white and shining, like the flutter of a woman's or perhaps a seraph's garment, together with a gesture, as of the good-by waving of a spirit-hand, there, somewhere upon the fitting outlines of what should have been the weird bark's taff-rail reach?

Ah, but the vision was already vanished again, and more completely, shut in and around by the weaving witch-waltz of the spraying spouts.

"If a cheat of the mirage, it is a most lovely one," muttered the young commander, half to himself. "By Jupiter! we seem to live in a region of wonderful phantasms, no less than dangers and horrors."

Unfortunately for his curiosity, he did not chance just then to notice Horner, whose eyes were riveted upon the spot where the apparition had disappeared with an eager and hungering intensity that might well have evoked a demand for perhaps a superior enlightenment as to its cause.

Presently, everybody was recalled to a sense of the more substantial situation by a shot from the maneuvering man-of-war that feathered a wave-crest only a few rods astern.

This was promptly responded to, with vastly improved effect, on the part of the wing-and-wing rover of the deep, with an accompanying buzz.

Then Uncle Bob Blowlock came stumping and piping aft, to know if the prisoner's sentence had been forgotten, the hour of grace having expired, and something over.

"Forgotten?" replied the Sea Wraith's skipper, sternly. "By no means! Make the necessary preparations at once."

This was accordingly done, meanwhile the forest of water spouts careering up swiftly toward the schooner from the southwest, comparatively unnoticed.

Then was momentarily witnessed a shipboard execution in active and solemn progress in the midst of an exciting long-range naval engagement.

The strange prisoner—"Dolores Spagoletto's lover," as Horner had first greeted him, was posted standing on the port quarter-deck bulwark-rail, his neck in a noose that was connected with the point of the gaff-boom, or sprit-spar, high over his head.

He was still ironed, wrist and foot, though from a rather gingerly way that he managed his shackles, a certain suspicion might have been excited under less sensational environments.

It seemed that the merest untoward lurch of the speeding craft, or even a sudden turn at the wheel, might at any instant precipitate the pitching outward fall overboard that would snap his spinal cord in twain, yet the man was absolutely fearless and composed.

Superstitious, crafty, cunning, veteran liar or yarn-spinner, Dolores Spagoletto's lover might be, but coward or vain braggadocio he certainly was not, and that in his hour of direst peril, too.

"Prisoner," called out Frank Freeway, in his most impressive voice and manner, "have you reflected upon the alternative that may even now step in between you and your doom?"

A guttural "Humph!" and an indifferent shrug of the shoulders were the only response vouchsafed.

"Will you make a clean breast of it or not?" more angrily.

For answer, Vallette, with a peculiar gleam in his eyes, merely shifted his delicately-balanced position so as to look backward at the advancing maze of water-spouts.

This was now within but a dozen cable-lengths of the vessel, and was beginning to exert as much effect upon the crew as the alleged moving Forest of Dunsinane upon Macbeth's castle garrison in the play.

"I never see the like!" said even stanch Seth Stratton, in an awed undertone.

"Not any mortal man else, or I'm a deck-swabbin' duffer!" groaned Uncle Bob, who stood ready with his mate to shove the culprit off the rail for his dance into eternity at the signal. "Blow me up fur a balloon-fish, if it doesn't make a chap feel creepy!" scratching his head with his hook. "In another minute the infernal witch-twists 'll be all around us!"

"Time's up!" roared Freeway, setting his teeth. "Prisoner, are you going to answer or not?"

Not a word of response—only an insolent stare, from under the beetling brows, which also seemed to have a strange confidence in it.

"Shove him off!"

It was done in the instant, and the incomprehensible castaway, Pierre Vallette, Dolores Spagoletto's lover, or what not, was dangling over the waves by the neck.

CHAPTER XXVII. REVELATION.

THEN, simultaneously with that critical, that fateful instant, what was it?

A flash from among the mazing water-spouts, a booming report, a shrill, sharp, commanding cry from somewhere in a woman's voice, and the whistling of a round-shot, that hurtled over the privateer's crowded decks, after neatly severing the tightened cord just above the struggling victim's head, letting him drop.

A panting shout from the victim himself, the falling away of the shackles from his form as if by magic even before he touched the water, a gesture that tore away the noose from his throat, and then the long, skillful strokes of a powerful swimmer striking out lustily for the nautical apparition that was flitting out and in the spout-woven labyrinth within easy hail of the astounded Sea Wraith's deck.

"Ho'd filed them irons on the sly!" bellowed Uncle Blowlock. "Bu't my binnacle-lamp 'f he didn't! fur ye see as how—" But, wide-

mouthed and goggle-eyed, he could say no more.

And the apparition—the witch-craft of the spraying spout-maze?

"Florine Floramour's La Caracalla!" exclaimed Horner, in a deep voice, at the amazed Freeway's elbow. "Good God! and the female Buccaneer herself, more beautiful than ever—more beautiful than a dream!"

But no need of this involuntary enlightenment, as the spirit-craft was resolving itself by fits and starts into the reality of the stanch, trim-built little pirate schooner, a model of nautical perfection, from the clean sweep of her desperado-crowded deck, the spick-and-span burnish of her brass guns and the airy curve of her water-lines, to the extreme rake of her enormously tall spars, flooded with the press of towering canvas that made her as a veritable bird of the waves, carrying her here, there and away again as with the cuff of invisible wings, and the beautiful woman, picturesquely weaponed and half-masculine of garb, who stood, with two others, smiling her defiance or her mockery out of the whirling mists!

"Frank! Frank!"

Yes, Jessie, dear Jessie herself, calling to him, and with a loving outreach of her white hands, from the pirate queen's side, until dragged back with a bold, remonstrant laugh by the third member of the group—a shorter, heavier woman than her fair companions, and yet with a bold, fearless beauty of her own—and yet he, Frank, her lover, paralyzed for the moment, and as unable to answer her back as if in the clutches of a nightmare dream.

"Frank! Frank!" the dear voice, the pleading outstretched hands, yet again; "you will not give me up? You will follow on and on and on, till I am yours again and forever?"

"To the death—through wrath, ruin or despair!" he half shrieked, finding voice, motion and volition at last, though with a reeling brain, and still as in an evil dream. "Jessie, Jessie! you will trust in me—you will not despair, you will keep a brave heart?"

"Yes, yes!"

Then another playful dragging of the poor girl back, a repetition of the bold, dark beauty's mocking laugh, and all was momentarily vanished, shut in, shifted away.

There was but one more fleeting reappearance, which revealed the swimmer, Pierre Vallette, being dragged up out of the sea over La Caracalla's rail, and only Florine Floramour herself on the poop, the two others having disappeared.

The jewels could be seen to flash on the small and white, but, doubtless, muscular hand in which the queen was seen fluttering a soft handkerchief in adieu, her perfect teeth glistening like foam-bells through the smile that parted her lovely lips.

"What, my little rosy Englisher!" she cried, in her broken but melodious patois, and with a special signal; "it is you, really you, once more, and with the American rovers?"

Deathly pale and with blazing eyes, Horner rushed to the rail, stretching out his clasped hands.

"Florine! Florine!" he cried, wildly. "What, you remember me? you still think of me at times?"

A smile that might have meant anything—witchery or disdain—a last signal, then doubtless a command from the rosy lips that could be so cruel and so stern, and that was all.

The pirate caught a sudden gust amid the bosoming wilderness of her towering sails that sent her about, the eerie dance of the water-spouts wove her deep in their spraying midst, and then she was gone to be seen no more, with a last rainbow from the sinking sun breaking into many-tinted shades along the shimmering haze-wolf closing behind her evanishment.

"Quick!" cried Frank, at the same instant springing out of the sense of enchantment that had so held him. "Stratton—Knowlesby—Beaumanoir—a broadside for the witch at parting!"

But old Seth laid his hand on the young man's shoulder with that genial remonstrance that so seldom failed to touch the spot.

"'Twere madness, Frank," he said. "See! we are already enveloped in the spouts; the concussion of a broadside might bring tons of water down on us, and—"

A thundering shot from somewhere at short range, a glancing ball that dismounted a star-board gun, and then—just what had been feared—tons, acres of cloud-water, from a dismembered spout, poured down over the decks in perfect smother!

Still, it was only a shock, and the gallant craft was shaking herself free of it, while reeling along through the mist-drawn labyrinth that sprayed and fogged her in, when yet another shot, seemingly from yet nearer at hand, tore into her cat-heads and killed two men forward.

"It's that infernal pirate-witch!" exclaimed Frank. "Shake out another sheet in the main-top, Knowlesby. There's wind enough here, if we could only see how to catch it."

"Ay, ay, sir!" And the order was forthwith bawled out, and acted upon as well as the obscurity would admit.

"You're out, Captain Freeway," said Horner, whom Frank at that moment came upon. "It can't be La Caracalla again. Those shots were from an iron gun, and all hers are of brass."

Then yet another roaring shot, though fortunately this time without doing any damage, and a hoarse voice thundering through a trumpet from perhaps less than a cable's-length away:

"Schooner ahoy!"

"Ship ahoy!" bellowed the privateer commander in return, springing to the rail, though as yet nothing could be made out amid the whirling spouts.

"What craft is that?"

"What ship is that?"

"His Britannic Majesty's sloop-of-war Battle Queen! Signify your surrender, or we'll sink you dead!"

And then, close upon this unexpected announcement, another roaring shot through the Wraith's rigging, but with no harm done.

"Rub the fog out of your eyes first!" shouted Frank, in reply. "We're not surrendering at this time of day!"

Then, the outlines of a huge approaching mass for the first time making itself apparent, the Sea Wraith, who had been aching for the opportunity, let go with her entire starboard broadside.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

OUT OF THE MISTS.

A TREMENDOUS crash followed the simultaneous report, accompanied by yells and curses from the dark mass in the spraying mists, showing how fairly home the gallant rover's broadside had found its oaken mark.

Then tons upon tons of water again upon her decks from the several water-spouts shattered by the concussion.

But no great harm done, and the immediately surrounding air rapidly clearing, with a freshening and steadying of the wind from the northwest, and a gleam or two of sunset flashes turning the whirling columns and dissipating water-smoke into golden sprouts and sheets.

"Hurrah!" shouted the young commander, and then a great cheer of relief and jubilation burst from the brave craft's decks.

Then she was out of the juggling mists, it was the war-ship that was entangled and blinded among them, and, as the Wraith bore away before the freshening blast, she let her formidable enemy have it at short range, fast, hot and heavy from her redoubtable Long Tom, napping nothing from the fog-baffled shots and broadsides in return.

"Hot shot for her!" shouted Frank, his eyes blazing with joyful excitement. "Good Lord! it is our opportunity at last."

And his strong hands clinched feverishly at the thought of the big battle-ship, with the hated Oldcourt, perhaps finally in his sea-rover's merciless clutch.

But it was not to be.

The privateersman sprang to his command, never had the noble schooner maneuvered better, and at last even the red-hot cannon-balls began to be poured into the enemy, even to the extent of setting her on fire in more places than one, so far as could be judged through the swift-gathering tropical dusk and the spray-smoke of the dissipating spouts.

But presently the latter had wholly disappeared, the great ship was in towering and indignant pursuit, blazing away with her big forty-four bow-gun, and necessitating a longer range and more prudent valor on the part of her weaker but more agile foe.

Then the weather changed yet again, and with surprising suddenness.

The sky blackened, the rain came down in torrents, and a great hurricane came whooping down upon and over the mysterious sea.

It was out of the mists, indeed, but into the night, the storm, the darkness and the rain, with nothing left but to close-reef it before the howling wind, and to yield an undivided attention to the safety of the laboring craft.

"Don't be downcast, Frank, my boy! We haven't done so badly; Torremento is still our goal, and Oldcourt will undoubtedly follow on thither, after having transferred the young lady to La Floramour's care on La Caracalla. The outlook is even better than it has been."

It was Horner who spoke, laying his hand gently on the young commander's shoulder as he did so.

They were alone together in the cabin saloon, glasses, decanters and the remains of a substantial evening meal before them, carefully bestowed, however, against the mad pitching of the vessel, the storm being at its height.

Frank roused himself from the somewhat dejected attitude of reverie into which he had sunk.

"I know that it is all as you say, old fellow," he replied, and yet still dispiritedly. "Yes, Jessie is perhaps better off for the change, and our outlook brighter for rescuing her than had Oldcourt kept her on the Battle Queen. And yet—" He paused abruptly, his brow darkening doubtfully.

"And yet—what? Come; you are naturally upset through the varying fortunes of this devil's

own day on this surprise-haunted Spanish Main. Try another glass of this prime old Santa Cruz that you bagged out of that last trader you captured, before sending her north with the prize crew. With this lemon-juice and sugar, it is a drink that would send rollicking Jim Bagley into the seventh heaven."

But Frank quietly declined the glass of punch that was tendered him—he cared little for spirits at any time, for that matter.

"Horner," said he, suddenly, "did you ever have a thought, which ought to be altogether extraneous or irrelevant, abruptly and persistently crowding itself upon you, and seemingly without reason or provocation?"

"Yes," surprised, and after a thoughtful pause. "And what thought has been thrusting itself upon you so strangely and urgently, my friend?"

"The thought of my mother," with a long breath, "and the mystery that is about her and me."

Horner started, looking at him intently. By this time many confidences had passed between the young men, and there were few secrets remaining between them, as concerning their respective past histories.

"That is strange," observed the Englishman. "Nothing in to-day's exciting incidents could have suggested the thought of your mother?"

"Not in the remotest degree—nor in the incidents of my entire cruise, for that matter."

"And the thought haunts you, eh?—hangs on, knocking for admittance, whether you will or no?"

"Yes—like some haughty, imperious presence, in a beggar's disguise, and with an insistence that will not be denied."

"Humph! But then these irrelevant visitations are always wholly unaccountable."

"Horner!" abruptly; and then the midshipman looked up to find himself being regarded with a new and searching earnestness.

"Well, old fellow?"

"What is there in my face that has put you in mind of that woman's?"

"Eh! of La Floramour's?"

"Yes."

"Well, as I told you before it is something that I can't explain—a mere suggestiveness, that is a resemblance and yet not a resemblance. Why does this recur to you?"

"Because that is a part of this forced thought of my mother, or is in some way connected with it."

"You don't say so?"

"Yes, and mean it, too. The thought that has so vaguely, strangely haunted me since it first came rushing upon me—when, do you suppose?"

"I can't imagine."

"When I first set eyes on the face of the female Buccaneer to-day!"

"Eh, what?"

"Yes—and with a force that even the shock of my immediately subsequent recognition of Jessie, standing there by her side, could only temporarily mitigate."

"Come, now, old man, but this really is odd, you know."

"Isn't it? I can see her now just as I saw her then for the first time in my life—the bold, beautiful face, amid the spray-mist, and with its strange smile—tender, mocking or cruel, who can say which?—at the rail of her witch of a vessel!"

The young Englishman looked at his companion with a somewhat altered expression.

Was the Privateersman Prince also stricken with the fascinations of the Pirate Queen, even to the exclusion of his beautiful betrothed, the blonde beach-lily of the far-away Northern coast?

But Frank's next words dissipated such a jealous suspicion, even if really formed.

"Yes," continued Freeway, moodily. "At that very instant this clinging, obtruding thought of my incomprehensible mother and her mystery came rushing upon me—I felt or knew instinctively, magnetically, that this woman, La Floramour, must in some way be connected with my past, would in some way be yet more powerfully connected with my future—and the thought has grown upon me since till all that I can muster of my will and determination fails to exorcise it. Ah, what will be the ending of it all? And then Jessie, my darling, my beloved! To think of her innocence, her trustfulness, in that terrible woman's power!"

"Florine will not harm or corrupt her!" cried the midshipman, earnestly. "She is too great, too noble! Besides, you have confessed that it is better for the young lady to be with her than to have remained on the Battle Queen with that villain, Oldcourt."

"Yes, yes; it seemed so. And yet how can I know?"

"It is so!" continued Horner, yet more earnestly. "You think La Floramour capable of playing into that scoundrel's hands in such a matter. You do not know her. Pirate, corsair, buccaneer she may be, but she would hold your Jessie's purity as sacred and inviolate as her own—would and will!"

"That other young woman who kept pulling Jessie back, with her wild, bold laugh?" queried

Frank, a little wearily. "The Spagoletto woman, I suppose?"

"Yes; and I would not like to answer for her as an incorruptible associate for your northern lily. But, *peste!* what is she? A minion, a slave, Florine's merest satellite!"

Here an unusual pitch of the vessel almost threw them out of their seats, and the door was burst open to admit the swaying figure of the first mate, old Seth Stratton, whose watch it was.

His oilskins and sou'wester were glistening with the streaming rain, and he seemed to bring with him the eerie breath of the tempest that was a-roar without.

"What is it, Seth?"

"Nothin' wrong with the craft, sir," was the breezy response. "But thar's two others in sight now an' then, an' our whole riggin' is jest alive with St. Elmo's fire. It's su'thin' a leetle skeery to look at, sir."

CHAPTER XXIX.

TEMPEST AND SUNSHINE.

BOTH Frank and Horner at once accompanied the mate on deck, after investing themselves with oilskin coats and hats.

The scene presented by the craft and the storm was certainly a wild and impressive one, to be long remembered even amid the varied vicissitudes of a seafaring and adventurous life.

The storm was simply terrific.

Only the actual watch were above deck, and they scattered and ensconced about, while holding on for dear life against the mad pitching and rolling and plunging of the vessel, which was in very truth fairly aglow with the strange meteoric element known among sailors as Elmo's or St. Elmo's fire.

It clung tenaciously to masts, spars and cordage like myriads of glow-worms, or ran up and down the cordage here and there in glittering, luminous drops and balls, shedding a brilliant yellowish and unearthly light over everything aloe and aloft.

As for the storm itself, the wind was terrific, the rain a deluge, the thunder and lightning incessant and appalling, the sea a chaotic wilderness of leaping, roaring mountain waves.

The schooner was all but under bare poles, with nothing but a half-reefed flying jib, looking the veriest, slenderest blown-out crescent against the blackness of night and sea, 'o steady her, and doing nobly after her wont, though with a maniac madness in her quivering spring over the Himalayan crests that was simply awful.

There was presently the little toot of a whistle in one of the hulls, and a bulky figure, shapeless in its oil-skins, came half-rolling and half-creeping aft, which proved to be the irrepressible boatswain, his puffy face cadaverously yellowed by the unnatural glow-worm light.

"Evenin', or rather midnight, ter you, Cap'n Frank!" he managed to make himself heard to say, while hanging on to the hatch-combings with a grip of his arm-hook. "Thar's the deuce to pay aboard this ship, my boy."

"What's the matter?" cried the young skipper, sending his stern voice through the hollow of his hand, against the elemental uproar.

"Bullheads an' blazes! madder enough, Frank," was the bellowed response, in what was doubtless meant as an insinuating undertone. "In the fust place, here's this St. Elmo's or St. Satan's hell-fire, what everybody knows means hey fur Davy Jones's Locker, an' me an' the hull watch already so skeerted an' terrified as to—"

"'Tis nothing but what every sailor should understand and laugh at."

"Hey! What? Blow me up! Howsome-dever—"

"What else is it?"

Uncle Bob saved himself from going over with a particularly vicious lurch to starboard, fortified his grip on the combings, and drew a yet longer and more lugubrious face in the eerie light of the witch-fire.

"Well, well, Frank, ye see it's jest this-er-way. Thar ben't a drop o' grog left under my charge for'ard—not so much as to famishin' mermaid's whistle—an' the men's innards fairly burnin' up fur lack o' suthin' strengthenin', notwithstanding their out'ards is wet enough, an' even too wet, fur that matter, an' it jest occurred to me as how a mere sup—half a pint apiece, say—might fetch 'em around a bit—"

"You're begging for yourself more than for the watch, I'll be bound," roared Frank, with unmitigated disgust. "Not a sup nor a taste till the storm parts! Go forward!"

Old Blowlock sniffed, glared, tumbled upon his posteriors, recovered himself with the next lurch, and then rolled and stumped, gesticulating, aft, doubtless with his accustomed oburgations upon the unsympathetic world at large, and prospective nephews-in-law in particular.

Freeway was making his way toward where Stratton had ensconced himself under the lee of the port quarter-deck bulwark-guard, to ask about the vessels that had been sighted, when the lookout was indistinctly heard to sing out over the chaotic din:

"Sail, ho! Yonder again, and hard a port!"

Simultaneously with the announcement an intense and prolonged lightning-flash, with its accompanying thunder-crash, showed the stranger.

An immense single-decker, and looming out with yet more exaggerated proportions in the wild glare, poised tottering on a mountain-like crest, and staggering off under half-clew'd topsails directly across the Wraith's wake, and not a musket-shot away.

"The Battle Queen!" exclaimed Frank.

Then the fading of the electric blaze, to be instantly succeeded by a sheet of spouting tongues of fire all along the Britisher's port-hole line, a hurtling, whistling roar distinct above the shrieking of the storm, and the privateer just dipped in time to have the terrible broadside intended for her hull go screaming over her quivering top.

"This infernal witch-fire makes us her target!" shouted Frank. "Bear away two points, and let her have it from our Long Tom."

The first order was obeyed, and then Stratton shouted back, through his hollowed hands:

"The rain's a deluge, sir! We can't serve a gun now!"

"The thunder we can't, when the Britisher can serve a dozen!" roared the young skipper, with an oath, but forgetful that the man-of-war's broadside must be comparatively sheltered. "Here, Beaumanoir—Jigsby—Ferris—Ratchet—the next rise should enable us to let fly!"

But Beaumanoir and his assistants were already at the gun, having anticipated the order, one of the latter sheltering a burning match in his sou'wester, and the weird, clinging meteoric fire furnishing an abundance of immediate light to work and sight by.

As the schooner scaled the next towering crest, the war-ship again toppled high in view on a corresponding water-cliff, having partly swung about so as to be almost immediately bow on.

"How have you charged?" cried Frank, making his way to Beaumanoir's side.

"Wiz ze dooble-shot, Monsieur le Capitaine," was the polite reply of the Acadian, though without looking up from his sighting-position at the great gun's massive breech.

"Let her go, then, when you are ready. Quick—we're on top—another instant and we're over it!"

Just at the prime instant, however, the match was successfully applied, mauler the rain and blast, and the gun roared out its iron destruction, with that brassy resonance in the roar that was as music to the free-rovers of the deep.

Frank caught Horner in his arms with an ecstatic hug, while a tremendous cheer rose from the watch.

It was a triumph beheld for but an instant, but such an instant!

A splintering fore-and-aft shock where the double-round-shots tore and raked along the Britisher's fore-castle, demolishing his bowsprit in their passage—a glaring flash of explosion amidships, indicating the explosion of at least one of the deck-magazines—and then nothing but the black, obliterating up-spring of the tumultuous seas between.

"A stunning shot, if I say it that shouldn't!" growled the English midshipman. "But I doubt if you get a chance for another."

This proved true, for a rather longer cessation of lightning-flashes followed than was usual, and when the next one came not another glimpse of the war-ship could be sighted.

The schooner still, however, continued to blaze and scintillate with the unearthly brilliancy of the clinging St. Elmo's fire.

Then, an hour or so later, when the electric discharges were again vivid and all but incessant, there was yet another signal from the lookout.

"The witch-craft! the ghost-ship!" cried, in substance, a dozen voices in a breath.

Yes; the phantom-like pirate schooner, La Caracalla, once more!

Even the graceful and light-borne privateer was almost as a clumsy galleon, compared with the light, airy, witch-like nonchalance with which the perfect little craft feathered the huge waves, seemingly to all but bound or dance from crest to crest with scarcely an intervening dip, and under such an outblown press of snowy canvas, too, it seemed nothing less than a miracle that her masts were not torn out of her by the roots.

Then she, also, was suddenly garnished by the mysterious St. Elmo's fire, which added greatly to her supernatural airiness of aspect and movement.

"The devil's pet!" exclaimed Frank Freeway, with an outburst of involuntary admiration. "Is there such another sea-skimmer in the world, I wonder?"

"None!" replied Horner, in a deep voice, at his elbow. "The craft doesn't swim that could match her. I was on board of her in a brief run off Torremonto once. By Jupiter! it was like backing an albatross in the teeth of a burri-cane. Ha!" his hand closed on the other's arm with a strong grip; "she again—La Floramour herself! Look! Aha, it must be such a storm

as never raged that would keep the Pirate-Queen below deck!"

Yes, there again.

Once more at her quarter-deck rail, with folded arms, apparently heedless of the elemental fury around her, her perfect figure standing out picturesquely, in its glistening rain-wet oil-skin covering that fitted it like wax, and her delicately-cut yet boldly beautiful face distinctly delineated in the dancing glow of the unearthly light, she was there, the ruling spirit of the spirit-craft, the bewitching genius of the night, the tumult and the storm!

Frank's only response to his friend's words and hand-pressure was to stare, wonder-struck and mystified.

Again that tyrant thought of his mother's mystery, with redoubled force, and as if linked invisibly with the strange, beautiful creature of the pirate-bark.

What could it mean?

CHAPTER XXX.

COME AND GONE!

IN another instant, however, and, with a parting wave of the Female Buccancer's beautiful white hand, the vision was gone.

In Caracalla and the Sea Wraith had simultaneously sunk into companion water-valleys, with a glistening foam-fringed water-hill between.

The St. Elmo's fire suddenly died out on each as mysteriously as it had appeared, the storm, the rain and the darkness had undivided away, and the vessels did not see each other again.

"Frank!" said Horner, when the young men again entered the cabin saloon, a little later on, preparatory to seeking such night's rest as the turmoil of the storm would vouchsafe them.

"Well?"

"Isn't she—Isn't she just angelic?"

"Yes," replied Jessie Heartwell's lover, adding under his breath—"after the manner of the fallen angels, perhaps."

"And you saw that last gesture of hers, Frank?"

"Of course."

"A wave of the hand, eh?" with much eagerness.

"To be sure."

"Her beautiful white hand?"

"Yes, yes!"

"Frank, old fellow?"

"Well, well, Horner?"

"Might—might it possibly," timidly, "have been a kiss thrown to me, you know?"

"Oh, yes, Horner—possibly. Good-night, Horner."

And then they retired to their separate bunks, and to their separate prayers, reflections or dreams—which?

Dreams, doubtless, on the romantic midshipman's part, and rosy dreams at that.

But with Frank Freeway, it was far otherwise.

In spite of the exhaustion that ought to have ensued after the manifold excitements of the day and night, it was long, long before he slept, and his fevered brain was vexed with a multitude of unquiet and perplexing thoughts.

What could be the upshot of his mother's life-mystery and his own?

What connection could there be between them and this wild picturesque being of the southern seas, whose mere aspect could thus magnetically call them into vexing and persistent clamor for consideration, almost to the exclusion of Jessie herself?

Or was there any such connection, or was it but a cheating phantasm of his imagination?

No, not that; something more than that, the inner promptings of his soul were whispering.

And then Jessie! Would he find her at the pirate-isle at last, and in what way—by intrigue, cunning, sinuous adventure, or through fresh hard knocks and bloodshed on the running wave?

That remarkable scoundrel, Dolores Spagoletto's lover! What might he not have divulged, had his secret tongue been loosed?

And he himself, Frank Freeway? Who and what was he? A mere sailor, a wandering privateersman, a football of fortune, or really the rightful heir to an ancient name and a princely estate?

Jessie—Floramour—Oldcourt—Dolores—Dolores's lover—Kelly, the steward—his own strange hard mother—one after another they drifted through his mind, individually, collectively, then in a fantastic jumble, and finally he was really asleep.

Waking, unrefreshed, he stretched himself out in his bunk, noticing half-carelessly that the vessel was rolling much less tumultuously, that the morning sunshine was streaming into the adjoining saloon, where some voices at last arrested his attention.

They were those of the English middies, one of whom, Bagley, who had never received quite the same hospitalities as his confrere, seemed to be begging the other for a chance at the cabin liquors, which Horner was as steadfastly denying him.

"But don't I tell you, Jase," Bagley was saying, "that old Blowlock hain't so much as a sup left in the forward lockers, and when a chap is

just dead for his morning dram, as I am at this blessed minute."

"Can't help it, Jem," was the firm response. "If Captain Freeway trusts me with the keys of the lockers here since his steward's death, it is because he knows that I would not abuse the privilege on my own account, or any one's else."

"But look here, Jason, you never make a beast of yourself, I know. But still you must know how it is yourself when a fellow's tongue is fairly hanging out by the roots for lack of a cooling drop or two, and when—"

"Say no more, my boy. Sorry, but it can't be done."

"Look you, Jasel" with sudden eagerness, as if stricken by a bright idea. "A splendid thought occurs to me," accompanied by a sound of smacking lips.

"What is it—that you'll stop drinking altogether, and get your foot on the devil in that way?"

"The deuce, no! But I wonder how Freeway would like me for his steward, you know?"

"You?" with a burst of laughter.

"Yes, by Jingo! It would be something of a come-down, to be sure, but then it wouldn't be like serving outright under one's country's enemy's flag, you know, and— Well, I might as well offer some return for the capital way the young skipper is treating me."

"Ha, ha! A fine return—by drinking up his best liquors!"

"Condemn it all! you won't give me even a cat's taste, then?"

"Hold on, there; I will, Bagley!"

And, with a shout of hilarity, Frank, who had by this time quietly slipped into his togs, vaulted, holding his sides, into the saloon.

Horner laughed, too, while Bagley looked uncommonly sheepish, but a slap on the back from the Sea Wraith's master was enough to put him in an excellent humor with himself, to say nothing of what immediately followed.

"Here we are!" cried Frank, throwing open his choicest locker, and producing decanters and glasses. "And it's a good-morning and good luck to all of us, after the great storm!"

To say that Mr. Midshipman Bagley was delighted by this unexpected turn of affairs, but tamely expresses the enraptured feelings of that worthy but somewhat over-jovial young king's officer.

"By Jove, Mr. Freeway, but you're a man of a million, you are!" he exclaimed, with his glass to his lips. "Sir, here's to all the hair off your head, a gold spike in your coffin-lid, and I, Jem Bagley, am yours truly to the crack o' doom!"

"Nonsense, and drink hearty! And see, here is our worthy ship's surgeon to join us. Morning, Doctor Flannigan, and the rosy is at your own disposal."

"Just a wee, tiny drop, then, gentlemen," responded the ex-mail-carrier, who, for all his Hibernian ancestry, was almost as abstemious in his habits as Frank himself.

"And look you, Mr. Bagley," continued Captain Frank, who was never kindly by halves, and was, moreover, beginning to feel his reckless, hopeful self again, "you can't be my steward. Not to be thought of for a gentleman of your sort; and besides, I have already engaged Tom Ratchet for the job."

"Ah, captain!" regretfully.

"But this I will do for you, old fellow. Hereafter you're to have the full run of my cabin privileges, just the same as Mr. Horner himself and the rest of us."

"Oh, captain!" ecstatically.

Bagley had heretofore been Uncle Blowlock's special guest of the gun-room, a condition of which, until now, under the peculiarly arid turn of affairs forward, he had had no cause to complain.

However, in the midst of his jubilation, the young man's jolly countenance suddenly fell.

"But look here, captain," he said, "I thank you with all my heart, sir, just the same, but—but it really won't do, you know."

"Why not?"

"I couldn't go back on Uncle Bob, and be without a drop forward, you know. It wouldn't be the fair thing."

"Bagley, you're a trump!" cried Frank, slapping him on the back again. "Run and tell the old fellow, then, that there's a spare pipe of old Jamaica here for the forward lockers—and that he's responsible to you for using its contents in moderation."

Mr. Midshipman Bagley slipped away with the joyful announcement, and the others made their way on deck.

The sea was rapidly subsiding, the skies without a cloud, and the schooner was fairly flying over the white-caps under full canvas before a stiff half-gale from the southwest, with not another sail in sight.

CHAPTER XXXI.

AMONG THE ISLANDS.

AFTER that, and for a fortnight or more, the course of the gallant schooner was on and on, and finally in among the star islets and islands the Windward or South Caribbean chain, still

far beyond whose tranquil and inviting lonely beaches, jeweled with bright shells, lapped forever by the amorous or stormy kisses of the tropic deep—

"Summer isles of Eden lying in dark purple spheres of sea!"—

was the yet more mysterious, little traversed sea that embosomed somewhere on its azure rim Torremento, or Lost Island, the pirate retreat and love-goal of the bold privateersman's hopes.

Finally, when somewhere midway between Barbadoes and St. Lucia, a sail was sighted—the first for many days—and then yet another, dead ahead on the dim eastern sea-line.

Frank felt a thrill of joy, for it might mean La Caracalla and the Battle Queen once again—somehow or another he did not look for a direct attack from the former in support of the Britisher; while his ship's company brightened up in the hope of fresh prizes, which had not been so numerous of late as to satiate their desires.

It proved, however, to be neither the one nor the other of these, but only two Spanish merchantment, bound from Cartagena for Cadiz, which had been smilingly despoiled of their treasure and valuable cargoes, the week previous, by the fascinating Female Buccaneer of La Caracalla.

"Ah, *capitano*," ruefully observed the commander of the larger vessel, on being invited on board the privateer, with the story of his misfortunes, "could anything be more calamitous, more unhappy? The heartless *ladrones*! Thus to be robbed of everything!"

"Take it easy, or at least philosophically, my friend," counseled the privateersman, sympathetically. "You were at least left with your lives, which is not often the case when one is dealing with corsairs in these parts."

"*Dios!* but that was only because we did not resist, I suppose. And to be despoiled by such an enchantress, such a lovely piratess, into the bargain!"

"But that, at all events, should be more consoling than if your despoiler had been a bearded cut-throat, my dear sir."

"Not much, not much! Ah, but the story that we will have to carry back to our owners in Cadiz!"

"Your cargoes were very valuable, then?"

"*Caramba*, I should say so, *capitano*! Dye-stuffs, medicinal bark, costly woods and vegetable ivory loading us deep, to say nothing of our treasure and precious stones."

"Ah, you had such treasure, too, then?"

"I should say so! The proceeds of our out cargoes in doubloons and pieces of eight—three chests apiece of gold ingots overland from Peru, and diamonds in the rough from the river-washings in the Brazils."

"You are, indeed, unfortunate."

"And to be left half-manned, in the bargain!"

"But how was that?"

"You should but see the piratess, with her red lips, her black eyes, and her laugh like a wedding-chime—an enchantress, señor, a sea-demoness, with an angel's face! *Por Dios!* it is a wonder that there is a sailor left to us. They tumbled over one another to get upon her accursed deck, merely for the privilege of serving her or dying for her. Is it any wonder that she took her pick from among our ship's-companies, appropriating the grain, and leaving us the chaff?"

"Bad, bad! Is that hunchback in charge of your gig your first officer?"

"No, señor; my third mate."

"And the others?"

"Gone!" with a hopeless gesture.

"Bewitched away?"

"What else? They were my likeliest and bravest men."

"The captain of your sister-craft yonder, why did he not also come aboard when I signaled?"

"There is no captain."

"No?"

"Only a second-mate that was, and he with a wooden leg."

"Ah! La Floramour has only use, then, for whole men?"

"And young ones, my friend. My age alone saved me individually, I am sure."

"Indeed?"

"Without a doubt, my friend. '*Capitano*,' she said, at parting, with her sweet laugh and the devil adance in her black eyes, 'I know it is a rude question, but I am something of a privileged character in these seas. How old are you, then?' 'Four-and-fifty, señorita,' I replied, with a tremor, remembering my wife and children in far-away Spain. 'You don't look it, señor,' she said to me, with another laugh, 'but you would age fast at Torremento, where antiquities are at a discount and fossils but little appreciated. *Buenos dias*, my dear *capitano*, and a merry voyage home to you!' And that was all. Ah, my young *comandero*, it is a bitter world, and a world full of trouble, and a world in which what may next turn up no man can say!"

The melancholy Spaniard then returned to his plundered ship, and in a short time both vessels

were off on their interrupted course, doubtless with heavy enough hearts on board.

There was better luck for the privateer on the second day following, however, when three sail were observed bearing down from the north, which long-sighted Seth Stratton presently announced would turn out to be Britishers—and most probably a small war-ship with two transports or merchantmen in convoy.

This proved to be the truth.

The Wraith played her waiting game, as was her custom, and presently the foremost vessel, which was coming down dead before a stiff wind, that had shifted during the night, ran up the British Jack, and fired a gun as a signal that the privateer should likewise declare her nationality and character.

She was a good-sized ship, barque-rigged, with the precision of aspect that stamped her as a navy-craft, and doubtless powerfully armed, so far as the number of her guns went, at all events, though they might not be of the most formidable caliber.

"All right!" observed Frank, quite gleefully. "Mr. Beaumanoir, have everything in readiness, and cover our guns out of sight. We might as well assume a little hypocritical innocence while discovering what this fellow is made of. Now, Mr. Knowlesby, up in the wind with our beauty as soon as you please. That is the talk!"

These directions were carried out with the most cheerful alacrity, only the day watch being allowed on deck, to keep up the deception that was under way.

Many conditions served to favor the success of the ruse.

The wind, though stiff, and more than stiff, was very steady, such a one as the Wraith was at her very best in, and the sea, though lumping up rapidly, could have been no better for the display of her prime sailing qualities on an emergency.

However, as she at first only lay to in the wind, without shaking out her colors, the barque, when within a couple of miles, came slowly half-about, and let go with her broadside of ten guns, as an additional reminder that Old England was still the mistress of the seas, or intended to be.

The young commander burst into a derisive laugh, while a jeering shout went up from the watch, as the volley fell harmlessly wide or short.

"Twelve-pounders, or I'm a Dutchman!" he exclaimed. "Why, she must be one of those antediluvians!"

"And her chasers can scarcely be more than eighteens, judgin' by that first shot," observed Stratton, who was once more criticising the bellicose stranger through the glass. "She's got a carronade amidships, too, that I wouldn't give a pine-tree shilling for."

"Shall we keep on lying to, captain?" asked Knowlesby, whose watch it was. "We can eat that duffer up, if we've a mind to."

"I know it, but no need to hurry matters. Order out the colors in a rather timid, hesitating way, and then skulk up a little closer in, say within hailing distance. With this gale on, we can be up and away at our pleasure."

This was done, the barque in the meantime once more coming down on the wind with a grand and conquering sweep, her *protégées* likewise drawing near, as if desirous of seeing the fun with the Yankee trader, as they doubtless all mistook the privateer for.

"What craft is that?" was presently bellowed from the barque's poop, in the accustomed arrogant and domineering tone of the typical British naval despot, by a big red-faced officer, looking quite resplendent in his cocked hat and gold lace.

She was then slowly bringing her broadside to bear again, and, standing very high out of the water, had quite a formidable and terrible appearance.

"The American schooner Non-Committal," was the purposely weak-voiced response. "What ship is that?"

"His Majesty's armed barque Pluto. Pull down that striped rag, or we'll send a boat to do it for you!"

"What, right off?"

The privateer was now slowly coming about, also, broadside on, less than three cables-lengths away, and everything in readiness to strip for business at an instant's signal.

"Curse your impudence!" shouted the Britisher, redder in the face than ever, and perhaps beginning to suspect something like the truth. "What are you, anyway?"

"The American letter-of-marque Sea Wraith!" was the thundered reply. "Stand from under!"

The signal had been given simultaneously with the response.

The guns were stripped as if by magic, the pipe to quarters screamed out, Smith Flannigan's fiddle caterwauled Yankee Doodle from the head of the companionway, and the Wraith's fighters came tumbling up in a swarm.

CHAPTER XXXII.

GOOD PICKINGS.

THEN, before the astounded Britisher could recover from his bewilderment, whose intensity

can be well imagined, the Wraith's broadside of six solid twenty-fours was poured into him with tremendous effect.

"Wear out!" shouted Freeway. "Now, Mr. Beaumanoir, for our Long Tom. And we'll keep on this blind side of the duffer a bit, just for luck."

Several of the barque's broadside guns could be seen to have been disabled, while the confusion on her crowded decks was perceived to be very great.

The Wraith wore out before the wind, like a very bird, and when the chaser was let go at just the right instant, it was with an effect even more disastrous to the amazed Englishman.

The great thirty-two-pound shot struck him fairly in the bows, splintering the bowsprit, oversetting his bow-chaser, and could then be marked sweeping the entire spar-deck almost amidships, killing and wounding men right and left by the splinters of its course, and finally fetching up with a great crash right in the heart of his poop-combings.

A tremendous cheer rose from the privateer's deck, and, coming about once more in the free gale, almost as if turning upon an invisible pivot, the fresh broadside was poured in with even more astonishing effect than the first.

As the smoke cleared away, it was perceived that the barque's colors and spanker-gaff were both shot away, there didn't seem to be a gun left standing on her unfortunate port broadside, while her bulwark-reach from amidships to bows was a ragged wreck.

"Do you give in?" sung out Frank, as the schooner once more bore in, bow on.

"What, to a deuced Yankee pirate that we could sling to our davits for a long-boat?" roared gold-lace and cocked-hat, purple with rage. "See you further first!" And then he was seen to give an order to the gunners about his stern-chaser, which appeared to be a very huge gun.

Not being quite in readiness, the privateer—still sheeting in for closer quarters, and "bending and bowing o'er the billowy swells" like a mermaid in a coquettish mood—awaited the delivery, trusting in luck or bad gunnery, or both, for escaping it.

All came at once, the shot—a really huge one, just scraping the schooner's foretopmast, and nothing worse.

"A forty-four pounder!" commented Stratton. "We don't want many more o' that sort."

"And we're not going to have 'em!" cried Frank, the schooner now being in perfect position for the return shot. "Let the duffer have it with that bow-chaser, Mr. Beaumanoir."

It was bow-gun to stern-gun now, and, as the noble brass piece was let go, it was perceived that the mild-spoken but capable Mr. Beaumanoir had surpassed himself.

The one big gun of the barque went over on its back, while half her poop was all but knocked to pieces, starboard.

Hurrah! another cheer from the rover's crew; and then, as she wore out and round like a spinning-top, her broadside was delivered into the enemy's tops, with the effect of bringing down her entire mizzenmast, short off within ten feet of the deck, while her fore and mainsails fluttered raggedly out of their yard-arm clew-lines as those spars likewise went into splinters.

At this juncture, a great commotion was observable on the Britisher amidships, where a comparatively small but compact body of her men appeared to be defending themselves from an attack on the part of the ship's company at large.

Shots were being exchanged, fast and hot, there was the confused glitter of steel, and wrangling shouts and curses, as indicative of a bloody intestine conflict, could be distinctly heard.

"It's a mutiny!" cried Frank. "Ten to one that there are pressed Americans yonder, who are snatching their opportunity! Once again with that beautiful Long Tom of ours, Mr. Beaumanoir, and with continued attention to their tops. Easy, now, and the turn will be made for you."

"It's true, by Jove!" exclaimed Mr. Midshipman Bagley, with a rougher oath than the one indicated, and he clinched his hands indignantly. "Blast this universal press-gang system, anyway! I never was in favor of it."

"Nor I," gloomily responded Horner, who was standing at his side, the tears in his eyes at the drubbing that his country's war-ship was receiving. "Curse it all! it's a high-handed piece of tyranny that always turns upon us and against us, one way or another."

Here the chaser was unloosed again, and, as the entire foremast of the barque was snapped off within a hand's-breadth of its cross-trees, she was little better than a helpless and dismantled wreck on the tossing sea, while the intestine fight amidships seemed to be going on with even increased virulence.

"Do you give in?" thundered the Prince of Privateersmen once again. "If so, down with that flag!" (It had been rebent and hoisted, after being shot away.) "Or do you want to be knocked to pieces?"

Gold-lace and cocked hat was neither red-faced nor purple-faced now, as he still stood on

the wreck's poop, with his officers around him, but very, very pale.

He advanced slowly and with something of a stagger to the rail, inclining his head, with a submissive and humbled gesture.

At the same instant one of his subordinates stepped to the gaff-stay fastening and began to haul down the standard, so jauntily defiant shortly before, now ragged and torn with shot-holes.

"Boat's crew for long-boat!" exclaimed Freeway, springing for the davits, and intent on receiving the surrender in his own person. "Mr. Knowlesby, a spare stand of colors, if you please. That's it," as the colors were handed him. "Mr. Stratton, you will take possession of the two merchantmen yonder in the mean time. We have no time to lose."

A moment after he had put off for the barque, two other boats, under Stratton's command, were on their way to do his bidding, the merchantmen lying hove to, and in close company, less than two miles away.

"Sir," said the defeated commander, with no little bitterness, in surrendering his sword, "the prestige of your devil's schooner's name had more to do with your good-fortune than her actual performance. For without that the pressed men would not have dared to mutiny, and the case might have been vastly different."

"Keep thinking so, sir, if it relieves your mind," returned Frank, with a look over decks, at the terribly destructive work of the Wraith's guns, that was a sufficient refutation of the Britisher's belittling remark. "It is the fortune of war—but you have my sympathy."

He then bent on and ran up the Stars and Stripes in place of the lowered standard, there was a cheer from the Pluto's pressed men, who came crowding jubilantly toward him, and the important victory was an accomplished fact, and a very solid one at that.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

TORREMENTO.

THREE superb prizes were the fruits of this clean victory of the bold privateer, which was likewise a bloodless one on her part.

The Pluto was a twenty-three-gunner, including her carronade, and a fine stanch vessel, though of somewhat antiquated build, with an original ship's-company of one hundred and forty, officers and men, besides being splendidly stocked with provisions and ammunition for a prolonged cruise against the American merchant marine, though she had succeeded in making but two unimportant captures before encountering her fate.

The two merchantmen were sister ships owned in London, with very valuable cargoes of hardware, cutlery, cloth goods, boots and shoes, and fine Spanish wines and brandies, which it had been the intention to exchange for rum, sugar and dye-stuffs in Jamaica.

But speculation proposes and the privateersman disposes, as is so often the case in war.

All the prizes, with their attendant prisoners, were, in the shortest possible order, placed in charge of competent prize-crews; which were mostly made up from among the fifty-four American mutineers on board the armed barque, who had been most eager to join the privateer's fortunes.

A round dozen of them were to spare for the gallant schooner herself, which was thus, in spite of the number of prizes which she had dispatched to various home ports, enabled to proceed upon her adventurous course with but a slight diminution in her full complement of working and fighting men.

Thence onward, the schooner was favored with fair but light winds.

On the morning of the fifth day after this fortunate incident, and without sighting another sail, land was made out to the southeast, which Horner declared to be nothing less than Lost Island, or Torremento, the sea-bosomed, mountain-guarded secret retreat of Florine La Floramour, the last of the buccaniers.

A close-clustering group of mountain peaks, lustrously, dewily verdant to their soaring summits, with any number of indolent, *dolce-farniente* and reposeful valleys or canyon nooks suggested by their intricate and slumbrous in-reaching dells, dingles and lagunes, with a general inner rim of snowy beach, that glittered with rare shells as if strewn broadcast with precious gems, and a far out-girdle of apparently impenetrable coral-bulwark, upon whose submerged or half-submerged rampart the tropic surf foamed and beat forever in its wild or coquettish pastime, as the case might be, and inclosing calm and pellucid pond-like links and stretches of varying widths—seemingly an unbroken virgin island solitude of the mysterious sea, unbroken by the step or heel of conquering man, and until now a stranger even to the apparition of an alien sail.

Such was Torremento, the one island paradise of this strange, little-known waste of trackless tropic sea.

It seemed absolutely impossible to imagine it as the home of lawless and bloodthirsty men—crime-stained corsairs, human demons of the sea, outcasts alike of man and God.

It was such a spot of beauty and possible wickedness as might have inspired the graphic and poetic lines:

"Know ye the land of the cypress and vine,
Where the flowers ever blossom, the beams ever shine;

Where the citron and olive are fairest of fruit,
And the voice of the nightingale never is mute!
Where the tints of the earth and the hues of the sky,

In color though varied, in beauty may vie,
And the purple of ocean is deepest in dye;

Where the cool vales are soft as the roses they twine,
And all save the spirit of man is divine!"

It was late in the afternoon of that day when the sea-rovers came to anchor quite close to the reef's outer edge, where anchorage alone could be obtained, by reason of its almost perpendicular down-shear far into the unfathomed depths.

A short distance off to the right there was a smooth interval in the foaming fringe of surf, which Horner said marked one of the very few navigable inlets through the entire coral barrier, but which he was not sufficiently familiar with to undertake to pilot the privateer through, under any circumstances.

"But a ship's boat can penetrate it without any sort of risk," he said.

"But look here," observed Frank. They were with a group on the quarter-deck, the entire crew being also idly disposed about the decks, gazing curiously at the mysterious island, the flocks of sea-birds, and the bright-hued mullet and other fish sportively aleap in the crystal quiet of the waters just across the reef, and within little more than biscuit-toss. "Where are the pirates or their habitations? Not a sign of human life has yet betrayed itself, and I have been studying the island for such with the telescope for an hour or more."

Horner smiled, though, being a modest young man, by no means unduly elated by the sudden importance thrust upon him, as being the sole person of any previous acquaintance with the spot.

"Nevertheless," he replied, "depend upon it that our approach has long since been signaled all over the island, and that we are still being incessantly watched with the most jealous scrutiny. La Floramour never neglects a precaution or leaves anything undone. For the rest, the two villages of the pirate community are quite on the opposite side of the island, though quite folded in out of sight from any observation from seaward even there. Wait, now. Follow with your eyes—no need of the glass at this distance and in this clear air—the direction in which I point, and tell me what you see." Pointing across the reef-bound inner waters as he spoke.

All eyes were eagerly bent as he directed.

"Nothing special, for my part," Frank took it upon himself to reply, "but a couple of lofty rocks guarding a sort of broad, shallow-looking cove, one of them seemingly so slightly balanced that a sharp thrust might topple it over into the water-entrance."

"Right, sir, so far as you go," replied the Englishman. "The rocks and the cove are there, but there is something else. Mr. Stratton, you ought to see in deeper and further with those famous long-range sea-eyes of yours."

Here there was a contemptuous snort from Uncle Bob, who, being likewise reputed a far and accurate sighter, so to speak, was by courtesy being permitted to lean on the poop-combings, while making his individual observations a short space away.

The first mate riveted his gaze upon the spot indicated for some seconds without replying.

Mr. Midshipman Bagley, who was one of the main group, drew a long breath, and then slapped his thigh with no little suppressed excitement.

"Oh, Lord!" he softly ejaculated, "if yonder island were only Otaheite, or one of the Marquesas group, which I doubt not it greatly resembles, what slathers of pretty native girls might a poor devil of a British middy make love to up there in one or another of those delectable retreats."

"It's not a short cove," observed Old Seth, speaking at last, "but the mouth of a deep, wide lagune. I can follow the links of it in spots, reaching far back between the two nearer mountains there—Hullo!"

"Ah!" interposed Horner, with a smile; "something else, eh?"

"By Jingo! I should say so."

"What else?"

"Signs of a man-o'-war's boats, an' a man-o'-war herself."

"So," muttered Freeway; "the Battle Queen, of course."

Then he began pacing the deck, thinking hard, and every now and then casting a searching glance toward the spot indicated.

"Hip, whoop, hurrah!" bellowed Blowlock, suddenly leaping high in the air, and then stumping and shuffling around the deck in an impromptu and vastly exaggerated hornpipe; "as if that war anything special in the way of far-squintin'!" And, without relaxing his jigging performance, he hollowed his hand after the manner of a spy-glass, and, propping it on

his arm-hook, began to peep away through the tube, as thus extemporized, as if for dear life.

"Hallo, Uncle Bob!" cried Bagley, going off into half-suppressed convulsions; "and what do you make out over there that Mr. Stratton failed to see?"

"What? Why, everything!" replied the boat-swain, keeping up his absurd pantomime. "That's Lord Oldcourt in there, fr'instance, playin' at cribbage with the ship's cook. Then two o' ther midshipmen is ketchin' tadpoles off the ship's cutwater with a hoss-hair fish-line—an'an"—with intense irony—"blow me up fur a king-crab of a deck-swabber 'f I don't see everythink what Seth Stratton didn't see, or didn't even *pur-tend* to see!"

"Your satire is something stupendous, boat-swain," interposed Frank, rather abstractedly. "Suppose you pipe your way forward, and see if the men wouldn't like an extra glass of grog all round in celebration of our safe arrival at Torremento."

Because of its unusual nature, Uncle Blowlock accepted the rebuff with more than his accustomed equanimity, and Mr. Midshipman Bagley was in such a good humor that he skipped forward to assist him.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

BY STARLIGHT.

"HORNER," said the young commander, taking the midshipman to one side, later on, "you have explored yonder lagoon over yonder that Stratton briefly described?"

"I have, Captain Freeway," replied the Englishman, with no little reluctance, "but—"

"Don't think I am going to ask you to pilot an expedition of discovery thither, old fellow. I have too much respect for your national feeling for that."

"Thank you, Frank."

"Merely answer me this: Do you think it really likely that the Battle Queen is ensconced therein?"

"I do, indeed. There is room and depth enough back in the mountains there to screen from view a bigger craft than the sloop."

"The channel-entrance to the lagoon—broad or narrow?"

"Very narrow and very deep."

"Has the lagoon another outlet beyond, think you?"

"Not that I am aware of; I think it extremely unlikely, as when I was in the lagoon, it had the appearance of winding far back into the mountainous interior; and the island is not a small one. I doubt if we could circumnavigate the reef-belt in an entire day, with the best of winds."

"Are there similar lagoons?"

"Not on this side of the island, and none at all of anything like a similar capacity."

"Ah! but on the opposite, or eastern side, where you say the pirate community is located?"

"There are any number of such lagoons over there, though much more secret and intricate than this one."

"Is it in one or another of them, do you think, that Florine makes her lair for La Caracalla?"

"Yes; while posted on the peaks all round are her lookouts, in constant communication with her, when she happens to be ashore, by some species of telegraphic signaling."

"Don't you think it odd that we have seen or heard nothing of her or her people since our arrival here?"

"La Floramour is mysterious, or nothing. We shall see or hear from her when she wills it," in a troubled tone, "and perhaps sooner than for our good, or in a way that we least expect."

"Might she attack us, think you, in Oldcourt's interest?"

"I am utterly at a loss to say. I only wish there may be a chance for you to treat with her, rather than fight with her."

"Why, Horner?"

"Well, I've heard of Torremento being attacked back in the past, and by far more powerful forces than you could bring to bear."

"With what result?"

"Annihilation for the assailants—their demolition and destruction—accompanied, it has been hinted, by cruelties and barbarities scarcely to be conceived of. But I hate to think of such things in connection with Florine."

"Thank you kindly, Horner. That is all I wish to speak of at present."

Night fell—the gorgeous tropic night—with scarcely a breath of air, and with innumerable stars, but no moon.

In the deepest hush of the dark, calm silence, a boat put off from the privateer with muffled oars.

Six sturdy privateersmen, picked men at that, were the propelling force.

In the stern sat two men—Seth Stratton, who held the rudder-lines, and Frank Freeway himself, who looked constantly and eagerly ahead, now and then speaking a few directing words in a low voice, and between their feet was a barrel of gunpowder, which had been lowered into its position by the sailors with no little difficulty.

Fringing the outer edge of the breaking surf,

the boat proceeded slowly but steadily, and finally reached the smooth interval that marked the passage through the reef.

This spot literally teemed with sharks, but was quiet and deep.

Entering the inlet, the boat proceeded more swiftly and still more silently directly across the smooth, inclosed waters, which were of crystal clearness, in whose depths the starry heavens were duplicated with such absolute distinctness that, but for the rippling and dimpling commotion caused by the soundless oar-strokes, one might have imagined himself actually floating over the ethereal firmament as his ocean floor, in some enchanted realm of dream or fairyland.

The mouth of the lagoon, with the towering twin rocks guarding on either hand, was finally reached.

Here a long and listening pause was made in the shadow of the larger rock, whose unstable or toppling aspect had in the first instance attracted the young commander's speculative attention from a distance.

Nothing occurring to break the silence of their environs, a landing was presently effected on the beach at the foot of this rock, which with his first-mate's assistance, Frank then proceeded to examine on all sides with as minute and critical a scrutiny as no other light but that of the stars would admit of, and in which survey the exceptional keenness of his companion's optical powers was of the utmost advantage.

The rock was of great height—whose fall outward would unquestionably have dammed up the lagoon-mouth from shore to shore for all time to come—somewhat globular in shape, and seemed solely to maintain its position by the perfection of balance with which it rested upon its narrow and extremely attenuated base.

Having completed this preliminary survey to their satisfaction, the barrel of gunpowder was transferred from the boat to a coign of advantage carefully selected for it, and a fuse attached.

Then the two men reentered the boat, and the course was continued, with more caution than had yet been exercised, up into the neck of the lagoon.

In a few seconds they were in all but pitch darkness, caused by the precipitous loftiness of the verdure-clad mountains on either side, and only relieved by the twinkling glow of fireflies of wonderful size and unequalled brilliancy.

At times their spasmodic illuminations were like the come and go, the flash and expiration of intermittent torches without number.

Without these adventitious aids, the passage of the intricate channel would have been next to impossible.

As it was, they invested the adventure with a strange and eerie charm. In the soft, alternating flashes, the dark waters and shadowy mountain walls took on a weird and unreal aspect. Innumerable bright-hued fishes were constantly leaping out of the water, to fall back again with tinkling splashes, disporting themselves in the witching lights, that lured them from the water-depths as moths are lured to a fiery death out of the bosom of the aerial night-depths by lamps or candles at an open summer casement. And now and then a shark's cutwater dorsal fin would lazily cleave the light-mottled duski-ness of the channel, or a huge alligator would betray its hideous reptilian shape, only to sink and vanish without a sound.

The channel rapidly broadened, and they were soon in a vast land-locked, mountain-folded lake or basin, once more reflecting the gorgeously-spangled heavens, and seemingly reaching in and away indefinitely.

Here the sound of watch and other ship calls at last reached their ears, causing them to come to a pause, and presently they could make out the sparkling lights in ship-cabin ports, a considerable distance ahead.

"It is enough," commanded Freeway; and the boat retraced her course as silently as she had first pursued.

Once again at the mouth of the lagoon, fire was applied to the fuse, and the expeditionists pulled well out into the great bay, and waited.

As they did so, the full moon rose grandly and beautifully over the dark eastern ocean-rim, looking supernaturally large and bright, and flooding the world of waters and the island solitude with her benign effulgence.

The privateer, lazily rocking at anchor on the indolent swells beyond the reef and surf belt, in exquisite silhouette, the ship-lights coming and going about her hushed decks almost as eerily and fairly as had the firefly torch-dance in the lagoon entrance.

The great inclosed bay was become as a sheet of liquid silver, the phosphorescent sparkling of the mellow-voiced surf-line girding it in running and curving away, like the fiery swords of the seraphim at night-guard upon Eden's walls.

The island itself, another and a yet lonelier Eden, seemed to pulse and gently shimmer in its bath of moonlight, like a happy Indian mother at her blessed rest.

A heavenly, a poetic scene, and yet the anxious watchers in the boat had eyes but for a little glowworm-like spot of fire at the foot of the great rock.

But it moved, ran, leaped and traveled much faster than any worm could have done, sending out odd little sparks along its path.

At last!

A blaze, an appalling explosion, an earth-quivering, water-shattering shock, dense smoke, vast body dimly toppling down through it, a crash, and then the bay suddenly beaten into lashing billows—and it was over and done.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE MYSTERIOUS ISLAND'S QUEEN.

"PULL well in to the rock," commanded Frank Freeway. "Let us understand just what has been effected."

But a few minutes had elapsed since the explosion, but the moonlight waters of the coral-locked bay were already tranquil and serene once more.

The boat was pulled into where the dethroned rock-monarch lay, as he commanded.

Frank had not miscalculated. The upheaval had been an unequivocal and unqualified success.

Entirely bridging the channel-mouth, and with one jagged side reaching far down into its depths, the great rock lay, an intact mass, save for its disruption from its original base, and sealing up the entrance to the lagoon doubtless for all time to come.

Even while they paused in their boat before it, suddenly there came the plashing sound of oars in the sealed waters behind the obstruction, and this was accompanied by indistinct shouts and curses, among which enough round sailor-like English oaths could be made out to render the meaning of the situation sufficiently plain.

Frank laughed complacently.

"Jugged!" growled old Seth, while turning the boat's head by a pull of the rudder-lines in obedience to a sign. "It's good-by to blue water, I'm a-thinkin', for Mistress Sloop-o'-war Battle Queen fur many a long day."

"Give way!" was the sole command in response, and the boat shot back out over the bay, under the impetus of vigorous strokes in which caution or secrecy was no longer attempted.

Lights had multiplied on board the privateer, and a congratulatory cheer broke from her deck as the adventurers shot out through the reef-gap to rejoin their gallant craft.

Save for the enraged cries that had momentarily been heard from behind the obstructing rock the appalling roar of the explosion had passed with no more betrayal of life upon the island than from the first.

Soon after breakfast on the following morning, however, a sail was reported as rapidly approaching from around a bold mountain head-land to the east.

"It is La Caracalla!" exclaimed Horner, bursting feverishly into the saloon, where Frank was leisurely finishing his coffee and cheroot alone. "You are to have a visit from La Floramour at last!"

"Well enough!" was the young skipper's nonchalant reply. "But what is there to get especially excited about?"

His own excitement, if the truth must be told, was far greater than he permitted to appear, chiefly at the possibility of his meeting his dear betrothed, and perhaps unexpectedly soon at that, but he sternly repressed it.

When they went on deck, the privateer was standing well out from the reef under half sail, a fair breeze having come out of the west to meet the rising sun, and the witch-like pirate-schooner, likewise far outside the reef-belt, was sheeting up in the wind toward her like a thing of enchantment.

La Floramour was alone upon her tiny quarter-deck, and she waved her hand gayly as she approached.

She was less man-like and more feminine in her attire than on the previous occasions that she had been seen, by the red flashes of the hurricane or the yellowing glamour of the St. Elmo's fire, and the chango was even a heightening advantage to her rare and picturesque beauty, if that could be imagined as possible.

There was still a compromise between the two forms of costume, but nothing could exceed the airiness of her soft white half-Turkish combination of the two.

A voluminous pink sash, gracefully supporting but not over-weighted with several light weapons, bound her lissom waist, her flowing trowsers were drawn at the delicate ankles with meshy chain anklets of gold that glistened with rare stones, bracelets of like costliness, tightened sleeves of a similar fashion at her wrists, there were gems at throat and breast, and yet her glorious blue-black woman's hair streamed out unconfined from under the little Panama hat that seemed rather to hover than rest upon her small, queenly-shaped head, like a white butterfly upon a gorgeous tropical flower.

"Good Lord!" muttered the entranced Horner, with a sort of hopeless groan: "could anything be more beautiful, more ravishing?"

Then his dejection rapidly increased, for it was not upon him, but upon Frank Freeway, that the mistress of La Caracalla and the pirate queen of the pirate isle seemed to be concentrating her

chief regard, as she was borne nearer and nearer to her light-winged craft.

"He's more handsome than I, and cleverer, too!" thought the midshipman, setting his teeth; "handsomer and cleverer than Oldcourt, too, or any one else. However," half-hopefully, "there is left Jessie, his betrothed, for him to remain true to—if she, the witch yonder, will let him."

But, if the young Englishman could have made his observation a little more dispassionate, he would have remarked something far different from sudden or commonplace admiration—something even wondering, puzzled or startled—in the growing intensity of the look with which she was regarding the youthful and comely privateersman prince.

However, it seemed at an end as La Caracalla came dancing alongside the privateer, and then, with a graceful, fitting sort of a bound, she was upon the latter's deck, while the vessels came about together, remaining but a few yards apart, with shortened sail.

With a flashing and careless recognition of the unfortunate Horner, she went straight up to Frank.

"God be with you, captain!" she said, in the purest and most melodious English. "Is it to be war or peace, hostility or friendship between us?"

She was stretching out her beautiful hand—and how she could preserve it so white and beautiful was past reckoning—the curious, eager regard having again deepened in the lovely face.

But our privateersman had already resolved in his mind upon a certain line of conduct with this enchantress.

Moreover, either from vanity or with his remembrance of faithful blonde Jessie uppermost, he had also misinterpreted the significance of that eager regard, and perhaps resented it.

"God have you likewise in his keeping, Captain Floramour!" he replied, with cold politeness. "But there must be a certainty of good faith between us before I can answer that vital question. And, to begin with, I want that man!"

He frowningly pointed out Dolores Spagoletto's lover from among the orderly pirate throng on La Caracalla's deck.

The pirate queen grew grave, biting her ripe nether lip as the extended hand fell carelessly to her side, and then gave her sweet, rippling laugh, which was the very music of nonchalant glee.

"Ah, my little Pierre Vallette yonder!" she replied. "I remember. So you would like to hang him over again, eh, captain?"

As for Dolores Spagoletto's lover himself, he was nigh to bursting with suppressed merriment, there among his wild but orderly fellow-pirates, it would seem.

"Yes," replied Frank, sternly. "I have reasons for believing that he conspired against my life, and his life is therefore the forfeit. I want it."

The chieftainess looked at him in some surprise, and perhaps not without some secret approval.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A STRANGE INTERIOR.

"CAPTAIN FREEWAY, you do not understand," said La Floramour. "I can make this matter plainer to you in your cabin. Conduct me thither, sir. Ah, my little rosy Englishman of old, Mr. Horner? Doubtless there are confidences between you two young men. Is it not so, captain?" looking smilingly from one to the other.

Horner had flushed and paled, already transported into a seventh heaven by even this careless and passing notice.

"Yes," replied Frank, "Mr. Horner is my friend. There are confidences between us."

"Let him be present at our interview, then—that is, if he cares to," and she made a step to the starboard rail which overlooked La Caracalla's deck.

If he cared? Horner was at once in a sort of ecstatic tremor, much to the good-humored envy of Mr. Midshipman Bagley, who stood with the boatswain a few paces away, but who was saying to himself that Horner was something of a paralyzed muf, not to boldly kiss the fair pirate's hand or toes, or do something equally amorous or desperate on the spot, and be done with it.

Frank had made a sign for preparation to Ratchet, his new steward, who was standing agape at the head of the companionway.

"At your service, and welcome, Captain Floramour," he observed, ceremoniously.

"In a moment, señor," and then she signed to one of her crew, calling out in the patois or jargon, which they seemed solely to use among themselves. "Here, little Jago."

The pirate thus contradictorily addressed—a towering and bearded fellow of particularly ferocious mien, his broad beltstuck full of pistols and other murderous weapons, though at the same time with something oddly reserved or melancholy in his air, which seemed to be a prevailing characteristic with his comrades—relinquished to another La Caracalla's wheel, which he had been controlling, and stepped sub-

missively to the rail, while making a sort of naval salute and Oriental obeisance combined.

"Eh, little mother?" he gravely responded, a strange sweetness investing the deep, harsh guttural of his voice.

They were a strangely contradictory lot all through, for that matter, those corsairs of the remote beauty-empresed, ocean-isolated corsair isle.

Bearded and savage-looking, with all the picturesque motley and nondescript in garb and weaponing that might be looked for as characteristic of their terrible vocation, there was, nevertheless, a man-of-war-like orderliness and discipline everywhere manifested, that was sufficiently eloquent of the organizing genius of their controlling spirit, and at the same time that strange pervading air of melancholy, for which their long sequestration from the mass of breathing and thinking humanity through successive generations might be answerable.

No wonder that the rough, happy-go-lucky privateersmen of the Sea Wraith regarded them curiously, much as if they might be ruffianly representatives from another world.

La Floramour spoke a few rapid words to her subordinate, and then turned to Frank and Horner again, with a slight sign of apology for the delay.

"At your service, Captain Freeway," she said, pleasantly, and forthwith accompanied them into the cabin.

"An out-an'-out pirate angel on board this 'ere craft, an' in secret conference with this 'ere craft's skipper!" sentimentally commented Uncle Bob for Mr. Midshipman Bagley's special enlightenment; "an' he a engaged, plighted, betrothed, promise-spliced man, too. Blow me up eff I understand it!"

"It'll be all right," observed Mr. Bagley, consolingly. "I only wish I was in his place. Suppose we take a drink, Mr. Blowlock."

When in the saloon, La Floramour declined to partake of the wine, that was blunderingly produced by Tom Ratchet, who seemed as much out of place in his new employment as a sea-cow would be at a millinery opening, but accepted of a glass of English soda-water, which seemed to please her greatly.

"This reminds me that I haven't looted a Britisher for a long time," she observed, in the most matter-of-fact tone conceivable. "And one is quite at a loss without soda-water at Torremento."

"We've the stuff galore in stock," replied Frank, who was rapidly losing his suspicion of his oddly formidable visitor. "You shall have a dozen cases on your craft at once, if you like." He made a sign to Tom accordingly, who forthwith bolted off, with as much eagerness as a basketed trout to get back to its native element.

The corsair chieftainess simply acknowledged the courtesy by a pleasant inclination of the head, and then accepted and lighted a cheroot with no more ceremony.

"Now to business, Captain Freeway," she said, briskly; and certainly to business it was with her, with few enough preliminaries. "That was a bold stroke of yours last night—the sealing up of Oldcourt and his big sloop in *Laguna Sumosa* so unceremoniously, like a fire-beetle in a bottle."

"Yes; I think so—if there is no back outlet that he can squirm out of?"

And he looked at her inquisitively, which, however, she paid no attention to.

"You were probably not a little surprised?" he inquired, somewhat nettled.

"No," quietly, "I knew it would happen."

"You knew it?"

"Yes; from the way you were studying the Twin Rocks from your quarter-deck yesterday."

"What! you could note that?"

"Not personally; but sharp eyes have my lookouts on Torremento's peaks—sharp and shrewd. But, Captain Freeway, time is passing, and one cannot bring the old scythe-bearer to with a round shot across the bows, or pitch him and his everlasting tick-tick sermonizing to the sharks at a midships gangway—the more's the pity." There was something shudderingly suggestive in her musical callousness or indifference of tone with such subject matter. "Is it to be peace or war?"

And, a sudden seriousness possessing her, she made the very slightest sign of putting out her hand again.

"About that rascal, Vallette?" demanded Freeway, evasively.

"Oh, I had forgotten!" good-humoredly still, though Horner was wondering at Frank's bearishness. "And I was to make you understand. The little Pierre conspiring against your life? Ha, ha, ha!" derisively.

"And you really set him adrift?"

"To be sure! It is a favorite and old-time ruse with me. A sail has been sighted—of what character? An abandoned man from the pirate La Caracalla would, on being picked up, and spinning his yarn about my barbarous treatment of him—and a capital yarn-spinner is the little Pierre, by the way—"

"Dolores Spagoletto's lover—yes, I should say so," satirically. "Your jealous fury must

have been indescribable, on that worthy's assertion?"

La Floramour evidently found much amusement in this, for she burst into a peal of musical laughter that was refreshing to hear.

"Ha, ha, ha! I jealous—the little Pierre," (he was an exceptionally large and powerful man), "Dolores! But, as I was saying, what better trick than for my picked-up decoy to discover everything about the craft rescuing him, against my leisurely demand for my accustomed tribute in La Caracalla? See! No subterfuge, no rascally concealment of treasure or ship's money, on the part of an hypocritical skipper then. Understand?"

"Yes, I suppose so," reflectively. "But I thought that pirates usually resorted to such—er—summary measures with their victims as to render ruses of this sort altogether superfluous."

"Ah! torture, the sharks, and on the general principal that dead men tell no tales, you mean?" complacently, and with an enjoyable puff at her cheroot.

"And you never resort to such—er—unconventional measures, then?"

"Never!" decidedly; "unless there should be resistance offered,"—puff, puff—"when, of course, it might be different."

"Humph!"

Frank then briefly related his reasons for believing in Pierre's having conspired against his life in Oldcourt's interest.

"This is news to me!" exclaimed the mistress of La Caracalla, with a astonishment that it was impossible to believe was assumed.

"And yet," he looked at her searchingly, "the man had communicated with Oldcourt on the Battle Queen either before or after his 'abandonment' by you, or both?"

"Before possibly, yes; for there was the opportunity. But whether later on or not, I do not know—in fact, I have never thought of it. Look here, young man, I have no sympathy with assassins, or an employer of assassins. Do you believe me?"

"Yes," unreservedly, but after a long pause.

"Then don't demand the little Pierre of me, and trust to me for disciplining him. What do you say, little captain? Do you consent?"

"Yes, little mother," after another pause.

"How say you now, then—peace or war?"

The young commander frowned again. What species of wild creature was this Floramour, anyway?

"My betrothed wife, Jessie Heartwell, is now in your power," he said, abruptly. "Give her back to me first."

"Ah, the Northern lily. No; that afterward. Peace or war? I may grow tired of repeating the demand, little captain."

Frank threw a further glance in Horner's direction.

"My little rosy Englishman!" said La Floramour.

Horner, reddening and paling, was submissively attent on the instant.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

PEACE OR WAR?

"YOU would do me a little service, Mr. Horner!" continued La Floramour, with her flashing smile.

"Would I?" stammered the midshipman, apparently ready to jump overboard among the sharks at the next word. "God bless you!"

"Signal the little Jago, and board La Caracalla, while I tarry here for your return. You have my authority. In the middle locker of a row of three in my after-cabin, you may find a small packet done up in red morocco—or you may not. But, should you do so, you can bring it to me."

The youth pressed his lips to the hand that was carelessly extended to him, and was off like a shot.

Instantly, La Floramour drew her seat nearer to Frank's, the original look of hungering curiosity coming into her superb eyes as she bent them penetratingly upon him, her entire manner, in fact, undergoing a striking transformation.

"What is this likeness that you bear to me?" she demanded, almost fiercely. "The something in your face that is also in mine? What does it mean?"

The young man was both startled and surprised.

"Bless me! how should I know?" he managed to answer. "Horner has noticed and spoken of it before this."

"Your true name—this Freeway?"

"Perhaps not; I don't know," coldly.

"You have a history behind you?" she pointed eagerly to the heirloom ring upon his hand, touching it with her delicate finger-tip.

"For such," haughtily, "as chance to be in my confidence, yes," and he roughly withdrew his hand.

"Your father?" she persisted.

"Dead."

"Your mother?"

"Living."

"And this secret history that—"

"No more of this, if you please, Captain Floramour."

For the first time she lost, or feigned to lose, her temper.

"Why do I not get angry, and kill you?" she cried, passionately. "It is not out of my habit when angered. No man has ever thwarted me, as you are doing, and lived to vaunt it."

"I never vaunt," coolly.

"I hate your sex in the abstract, too!" she continued, somewhat irrelevantly perhaps. "Why do I not resent your—your surliness by taking your life, I say?"

"I am sure I don't know," a little wearily.

"You are here alone with me, and unarmed—me, Florine La Floramour, the pirate queen—perhaps also, as alleged, La Floramour the merciless, the barbarous, the remorseless, the stained of a hundred crimes!" with a wild laugh. "True."

"Have it, then!"

Her face was on the instant as that of a lovely demoness, and her hand flew like a flash of light to the pistol-butt in her sash.

But the young commander hardly seemed to notice or care, even lazily putting up his hand to hide a little yawn.

La Floramour gave a short laugh, though continuing to regard him sternly.

"Little captain, you are a brave man—a very brave man!"

"Not at all, as just proved, though."

"What do you mean?"

"You haven't really been incensed for a single instant—all assumed."

La Floramour had risen in her apparent fury. She now threw herself again in her chair, leaned back, and her peal of unrestrained merriment again rung through the saloon.

"Still, little captain," she continued, with a full return of her good-humored imperturbability, "you do wrong not to trust me."

"Do I?"

"Is it peace or war? And I sha'n't ask the question again—*to-day*."

"Restore my betrothed to me," resolutely, "and I will give you my answer."

"You are welcome to visit her now, without delay—though alone with me on La Caracalla," temporizingly.

"Where is she?" cried Frank Freeway, with tumultuous eagerness.

"Aha!" banteringly, but without displeasure; "you can wake up on occasion! And your sort of love must be worth having, I should say," with something *blasée* or regretful in her tone.

"Where is she?" he repeated.

"At my fastness in Torremento's mountain heart. You will have my safe conduct. Will you come?"

"No."

"But you shall have my word besides—it is my bond!" proudly.

The temptation was great, but so was the uncertainty as to this strange being's good faith; and even with the thought of Jessie tugging at his heart-strings, Frank felt that he owed it to his duty—to his craft and his men not to accept the risk.

"I shall not go," he replied with a decision of manner that was conclusive.

"A pretty lover, you!"

"I am my own sort. Sooner or later, you will produce Miss Heartwell, as I demand, here on my own ship."

"Will I, indeed?"

"Yes, or I shall know the reason why."

A flash of real fury—suppressed instantly, however—passed over La Floramour's face.

"Insolent!" she exclaimed. "Why, even now you are in my power! A word from me and you and your privateer would be as wind that has whistled its will and passed."

Frank Freeway thought of his brave bark, his guns, his numerous crew, and the scant seventy men that his keen eye had made out La Caracalla's ship's company, and smiled.

"Oh, you will come to know better!" she continued. "My force could overwhelm yours. I say it without boasting."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

ON THE WATCH.

FRANK still smiled, and then was more serious.

"You make your calculations on the support of the Battle Queen's ship's company?" he half-queried. "I confess that you might stand a show against me, with such reinforcement, supposing it possible for you to obtain it."

"You mistake. The corsairs of Torremento fight alone, and solely alone. But, as I said, you will come to know me better, and perhaps to wish that you had trusted me."

"Perhaps."

"You will not come alone?"

"No."

Here Horner returned from the pirate schooner, to say that he had looked in the locker as directed, and without finding any such packet as was described.

"Is it possible?" said La Floramour, ironically.

Then she quitted the cabin lightly, followed to the deck by both young men.

La Caracalla was still not far away, lingering lazily and drooping in the free wind, with half-folded wings.

A gesture from the pirate mistress, and it was alongside the privateer, with eager, out-blowing pinions, almost like a piece of wizardry.

She sprang to her deck with the lightness of a bird.

"You will not come?" with a last appealing look thrown back at the young commander.

He shook his head.

Another gesture of the flashing white hand, and the airy vessel was off on the wind, retracing its course with a speed that seemed hardly credible.

A few minutes later it had passed from view around the mountain headland.

"Frank!" exclaimed the Englishman, wonderingly.

"What?"

"You mean to say that she wanted to take you with her to see Jessie, and you refused?"

"Just that precisely!" and Frank, half-angry with himself, and not certain whether he had acted for the best or not, began pacing the deck in by no means an agreeable frame of mind.

"Bear away!" he gruffly called out to Stratton a few moments later. "We might as well circumnavigate the island, for our general bearings, at once."

The Wraith was also at her best in the wind that was blowing, and presently rounded the headland but a short time after La Caracalla had disappeared.

But, for all that, not another trace of the pirate schooner was glimpsed, though there was a break in the reef on the eastern side of the island, to be sure, by which she might have entered, and thence made her way to one or another of the several inlets that could be seen piercing sinuously back into the mountains.

There were no more signs of life, however, than had been previously noted, and the entire day was spent in circumnavigating the reef-barrier to little purpose, the privateer reaching her original anchorage at nightfall.

"We must keep a sharp watch on the weather," observed Frank to Stratton, who was again on deck duty. "Or would you advise getting inside the reef while there is light enough, as a general precaution, Seth?"

"It's the tropic winter," was the reply, "when that's no telling what may happen—a *carm* or a *tornado*, I say now."

The order was given, and the passage of the reef-inlet finally effected without accident, after which the vessel was as safe against meteorological surprises as if anchored in a mill-pond.

"To-morrow," observed Frank, "we'll skirt the island shores proper, inside the reef, and make a thorough exploration."

He then took Horner's arm, and joined Knowlesby, the surgeon and Bagley at the supper-table.

It was well that the precaution had been taken with regard to the privateer's safety.

They were still at table by candle-light when there was a whooping, screaming sound overhead, a sudden lashing of the sea, and the schooner righted, after being half thrown on her beam-ends, and tugged at her anchor-stays like a frightened steed.

"A short-tailed tornado, or a blue-bellied white squall, one or t'other," grimly explained Stratton, as they came tumbling up the companionway. "Lucky we snugged in when we did. Look!" pointing to the near reef.

As far as the eye could reach through the night, the barrier was wild with leaping, thundering surf, and the ocean waste was being torn into chaos by the insane fury of the wind.

Frank could not help hugging himself with a sense of quiet satisfaction, while the general feeling was one of snugness and safety.

For, though the schooner was more or less tossed and swung about by the force of the wind swooping across the low-lying or wholly submerged coral rampart, the tumult of the outer ocean was comparatively unfelt in the broad inner bay, where she rode at her anchor with no more unrest and jerkiness than if within a secure land-locked harbor in a season of storm.

"We're as snug as we could well care to be," said Frank, after watching the outer storm for some moments. "I believe I'll bunk in for a long night's rest."

Others were of a like mind, and in a short time, the storm continuing to rage, the regular watch had it all to themselves on the privateer's deck.

The young commander's berth, or sleeping cabin, was a spacious one, provided with extra-large dead-light openings, which, of course, were unclosed by reason of the heat.

He was awakened from his first refreshing sleep by a great flash of lightning and the accompanying thunder-crash, while the storm was blowing in at the ports most agreeably.

He got up and looked out.

The ports faced the reef, which could be dimly made out, lashed to indescribable fury, the tempest being evidently at its maddest pitch.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

A SECRET OF THE STORM.

THEN there came another lightning-flash, and Frank Freeway, still at his post of momentary

observation, started back in supreme astonishment.

A vessel, and lying to under close-reefed canvas, out beyond the barrier, and at the very verge of that appalling surf, whose thunderings were so deafening, whose flying spume even smote him in the face, borne raggedly on the pinions of the shouting and yelling wind? Incredible!

Doubtless another mirage—and whoever heard of a mirage at night, and in such a night—or a cheat of his senses.

He would look again.

He was doing so, peering eagerly out into the storm, while awaiting the next revealing flash, when he received a slight tap from something on the forehead.

As he naturally threw back his head, thus raising his chin, an arm of iron suddenly encircled his throat, its wrist-bone pressing in the thyroid cartilage, better known as Adam's Apple, with crushing and strangling force.

The thug-like art of strangling, latterly known as garroting, is an old, old criminal practice.

Indeed, in the history of wrong and violence, as in the world in the abstract, it is doubtful if there is anything new under the sun.

In another second the master of the Sea Fiend was insensible upon his back, very successfully and cleverly garroted.

Frank had often reflected, while idly considering the extra-spaciousness of his cabin's dead-lights, that they were quite roomy enough for a man or two to crawl in or out of in an emergency.

When he recovered his senses, it was by the spray of storm-waves flying over and beating upon him, while he was at once aware of being in a boat that was progressing like a charmed thing amid billows that should have torn any ordinary boat to pieces or beaten it down into the depths in no time.

And such a boat!

He sat up, a little giddy, but otherwise none the worse for his mishap, and began to take his situation into consideration slowly.

First, as to the boat, which he was enabled to study by the frequent lightning-flashes, and by which he saw that he had four companions, who were regarding him sternly, and yet, it seemed, with not any special animosity.

It was long and canoe-shaped, but with one side flat and the other rounding. It carried a long narrow lateen sail (which seemed to be proof alike against the fury of wind or sea, while likewise serving to carry its fixture over the leaping crests with incredible rapidity and safety) and was simply unsinkable and uncapsizable, or it could not have lived an instant in that hell of waters.

Second, as to the location, another friendly flash showed him that he was passing through the reef-outlet into the mad open sea beyond.

Yet another revealed the close-reefed outlines of his own schooner back in the comparatively quiet bay, while hovering witch-like upon the surf-edge beyond (his first glance at the dead-light opening had not deceived him, after all) was that other craft, without a doubt La Caracalla itself.

La Caracalla, and out there, maddening and chaotic swirl!

Well, if anything was capable of it, La Caracalla was; and, with this poor comfort for his reassurance, Frank gave himself up to moody reflections and waited.

How it was effected he never exactly knew, but somehow, at all events, he was finally transferred on board the pirate schooner.

Retaining his foothold on the reeling deck with the utmost difficulty, as, indeed, did pretty much every one else on view, he was about to obey a savage impulse to spring upon the first man he found himself in actual contact with, wrest a weapon from him, and make a fight for his liberty.

But once more he was summarily overthrown from behind, though this time without choking or violence, and bound and gagged in addition.

Then he found himself carried into the cabin and laid upon its floor, where he seemed to be left to himself.

Though helpless on his back, he could move his head, so that he tried to look about him, but the cabin was so dimly lighted that he could make out little or nothing of his surroundings.

A step sounded on the carpeted floor, and the light was suddenly much increased.

Then Pierre Vallette stepped before his range of sight, silently assisted him into a sitting attitude, though without relieving him of gag or bond, and looked at him with a peculiarly mocking or menacing expression, it was hard to tell which.

While returning the fellow's stare with contemptuous interest, the young commander could not abstain from a feeling of secret insecurity and alarm.

Was the pirate barque in sole charge of this desperate fellow, whom he, Frank, would have so relentlessly hanged by the neck, and was Oldcourt at last about to wreak his combined fears, jealousy and revenge upon him by means of this doubtless all too willing human or inhuman instrument?

A moment's reflection, to the effect that the pirate-queen would not have been likely to intrust the command of the *La Caracalla* to other hands than her own in this critical emergency, might have dissipated this lugubrious impression, but this thought did not occur to him.

For the lack of other employment in this state of suspense, the privateersman wholly ignored the sinister presence and regard of Dolores Spagoletto's lover, and fell to taking note of his environments with no little curiosity.

They were worth the scrutiny.

He was in what might well have been the fairy saloon-cabin of a fairy ship.

His form rested upon a Turkish rug of the deepest velvety wool and richest design, others of which covered the entire saloon-deck.

Lights were furnished by a profusion of tall wax candles of different colors, securely set in heavy fixed bronze or gold stands or sconces, all of which might have been from the corsair-spoils of some wealthy chapel or shrine.

The furniture, the appointments, the mirrors, the hangings were of the cosiest and yet most tasteful description—suggestive both of the sea and of womanly art and cultivated taste.

The suspenseful situation, however, lasted but for a moment.

There was the faintest of footfalls behind Frank's back, a softly-muttered word or two of command, and Pierre Vallette submissively disappeared.

Then swish, swish! snip, snip! there was the sound of a knife or shears severing bonds and gag, still from behind, or at all events unseen, and Frank Freeway was released.

He bounded to his feet and turned, to recognize Florine La Floramour as both his deliverer and captor.

She was supporting herself against the tremendous motion of the vessel by leaning with a light, graceful couch against a richly-tapestried stanchion, the delicate dagger with which she had wrought his release still in her hand, and regarding him with a peculiarly-composed and satisfied smile, which, however, had nothing in it of undue triumph or exultation.

CHAPTER XL.

SILKEN TOILS.

FRANK FREEWAY had only time to notice this much in the abstract, however, when, having as yet only imperfectly found his foothold, after springing so suddenly to an upright attitude, an unexpected and tremendous lurch of the vessel sent him all abroad, sprawling headlong.

With a lightning-like dexterity, though, the pirateess threw out a large divan so as to catch his fall, and then burst into her silvery laugh as he went down upon it at full length.

More or less mortified, the young man hurriedly recovered his equilibrium, and then, perhaps to mask his confusion, examined the article of furniture that had been interposed.

It was very heavy and solid, though luxuriously upholstered, and yet she had shifted its position apparently without exertion, and by a mere grasp of the hand.

"Do not mind the divan," remarked Florine, with mock earnestness. "I doubt if it is injured."

"You must be very strong," said Frank, gloomily disregarding the pleasantry.

Florine laughed.

She was attired much as he had last seen her, save that the sleeves of her gossamer-like Oriental jacket were loose and wide-flowing, instead of being gathered at the wrist.

She coolly bared her round, snowy right arm to the shoulder, to the revelation not alone of its plump perfection, of which any duchess might well have been envious, any sculptor enamored, but also of a superb muscular development beneath the ivory, satin skin.

Catching with the one hand an ornamental ringbolt directly over her head—a large, loose ring perhaps used to hang a lamp from in quiet weather—the strange creature proceeded to swing and whirl her body madly and recklessly about with such rapidity as almost to take the gazer's breath away.

Then, presto! there was a flashing curve, a whirling somerset, without the carpet being so much as brushed by any contact, and she was continuing her acrobatics head-downward, and dangling from her foot in lieu of her hand.

In this position she suddenly caught the back of the divan, and cast it lightly the entire length of the saloon; after which, with a last flashing somerset, she was quietly maintaining her poise in the middle of the lurching deck-floor, composed, unflustered, and without having turned a hair, as they say in racing parlance.

"There, my little captain!" she observed, quietly. "I don't cut up such mad pranks for everybody, even though my muscular capacity might be seriously impugned, so you ought to feel flattered by the exhibition."

Frank's sole acknowledgment that he did so feel was by a cold inclination of the head.

In fact, with his Northern training and prejudices, he might have thought the exhibition anything but seemly or in good taste, notwithstanding that this picturesque being might be

considered as one apart from ordinary humanity and a law unto herself.

Neither did he choose to comment upon the trap that had been sprung upon him so cleverly and with such thoroughness.

It had succeeded, he would simply await its outcome, and there was an end for the present.

"Let us go on deck," suggested his captor. "The glory and majesty of that superb storm is wholly wasted on one down here."

She opened the door, springing toward the companionway with her accustomed bird-like lightness, and he followed as well as he was able, for, true sailor that he was, the tremendous motion of the vessel, which seemed at times to pitch and roll almost completely over, was about as much as he could endure.

The schooner was just heading, but for the open sea as they made themselves secure upon the quarter-deck.

At the same instant her bow-chaser was let off with a ringing boom that sounded distinctly apart from the roaring of the storm.

"I'm not unmindful of your ship's company," anxiety on your account, little captain," laughed out La Floramour in Frank's ear. "That signal-gun will doubtless enlighten them somewhat as to your whereabouts. See!"

As she pointed away, a great lightning-flash showed the privateer, in her comparatively quiet haven behind the raging reef, her deck thronged with wonder-gazers in the direction of the storm-tossed pirate craft.

So vivid was the flash, indeed, that Frank doubted not of his being personally recognized, and therefore waved his hand, with an expressive gesture that might or might not facilitate the general understanding as to what had befallen him.

It was some minutes before the next flash followed, and it revealed nothing anywhere but the fury of the storm, the stupendous agony of the raging sea.

After that, and for some time, the flashes were almost continuous, and the attendant thunder-crashes scarcely punctuated by an appreciable pause.

La Caracalla seemed to fairly fly away, almost in the very teeth of the storm, and, like a petrel on the wing, scarcely to touch the water while following the tumultuous undulations of the mountain waves.

Frank shielded his eyes from the showering spray, and wonderingly looked away along the plunging or up-shooting deck-line, and out upon the wild frenzy of the red-litten night and sea.

Once an irregular high jag of the uttermost outlying reef loomed and glistened out of the swirling chaos to starboard as the vessel tore past it at race-horse speed.

There was an appearance on its crest as of a half-drowned mariner crouching and clinging there, and then something suggestive perhaps of a perishing woman's hand flashing up out of the wild surge lashing its base, as the entire vision swam back and was gone.

Only a fleeting creation of the distempered fancy, of course, but it nevertheless brought into the young man's morbid mind a stanza of a weird and powerful poem which he had committed to memory when a stripling, and with the strippling's sentimentalism which had long since been rudely erased by the rough attrition of an adventurous career:

"I raised my arms to Heaven through the sleet
And wind and darkness, praying, though unmanned,
For strength to clutch that black rock with my feet,

And, reaching out, drag n that little hand.

"I raved to God for mercy for that soul,
That woman's soul within its storm of pain.
My only answer was His thunder-rol
And the red streamers of the hurricane!"

But the course of the witch-bark was out and away, to revel in the mid-swirl of the untrammelled storm, regardless of rocks behind or dangers to come.

"Is it credible that she can live it out?" muttered Frank Freeway, half to himself.

"*La Caracalla* can live in anything!" the pirate queen made answer, exultingly.

CHAPTER XLI.

LA FLORAMOUR'S POWER.

INDEED, it seemed as though *La Floramour's* claim for her wonderful schooner's prowess was no idle vaunt.

And as for the strange Florine herself, her fantastic humor was presently at the highest pitch.

Seeming to fairly glory and exult in the mad scene of peril around her, as though its tempest-fury was her wild being's very breath of life, she presently stood up by the young commander's side, and began to sing and gesticulate.

She was bareheaded, and, shaking the lustrous masses of her midnight tresses free of their confinement, they streamed out upon the gale, intensifying the wild beauty and sibylline impressiveness of her aspect.

Her crew, probably used to such rhapsodies, looked at her with apathetic approval, or gave no heed.

As for Freeway, he could not but regard the

woman in a species of wondering dream, or trance, as if she might be a delicious cheat of the senses—a fever-dajured sprite or mermaid out of the stormy depths—rather than a reality, or perhaps truly a spirit-form from another and unknown sphere—

"One of those spirits of storm that come on the rushing wind."

Breasting the thunder-cloud, and with wild hair blowing behind her.

And then *La Floramour's* saying

Her voice was strangely powerful and strangely sweet, with a wonderful contrast.

Sometimes it rose on the gale like a weird and weird incantation, but mostly it was in a plaintively sad and melancholy cadence of unintelligible words, but both in rhythm and meaning of the storm and of a spiritual significance underlying it as of a mother's lullaby for her billow-cradled child, or a sea-maid's wailing lament for her human lover, fugitive, lost or drowned.

"Ah, my little captain!" cried *La Floramour*, interrupting her improvisations briefly, to fling upon the spell-bound Freeway the dancing splendor of her glorious black eyes; "is it not beautiful, is not ravishing, the storm, the ocean, the infinitude of the tempestuous night? And will you not yet reveal to me the secret of your stormy past? It cannot be that I have sung for you sweetly enough. Listen, then, heart's dearest of the northern lily!" And again her voice arose in the weird melody of its mad caprice.

But Frank had hardly heard, or heard but dimly, the interjected words amid the pause.

A strange lethargy was stealing over him, and the wailing song came to him with a vague, far-away sound, that had a less and less distinctness and reality as he listened and dreamed.

He was dimly conscious of a soft, lingering touch covering him up with a sail-cloth, or some other water-proof covering, against the driving spray.

Then the mad motion of the barque seemed to grow gentle and cradling in its fluctuations, and at last he knew no more.

It had been perhaps past midnight on the occasion of the young man's abduction from his cabin on the privateer.

It was dawn of day when he came slowly out of his second unconsciousness, as superinduced perchance by *La Floramour's* magical singing.

She was seated beside him, composed and serious, while regarding him with a strangely curious look, as he rubbed his eyes, threw back the oilskin that had covered him, and rising into a sitting posture, looked around him not a little bewilderedly.

"Ah, something of a change, little captain, eh?" she queried.

The storm had vastly abated, the tropic sun was already trembling on its prompt rise over the ocean-rim, and *La Caracalla*, not a whit the worse, a low or aloft, for her mad bout with the open sea at its frenzied rage, was careering lightly before what was no harsher than a fresh, free wind on her return to Torremonto, the eastern side of which was distinctly visible and rapidly rising down in the southwest.

"A change?" echoed the young man, who was now disposed to put a much better face on his misadventure than formerly. "Well, I should rather say so, little mother."

The use of the expression—so common among her own people, who were in the habit of addressing her thus, much after the simplicity of the Russian and other semi-Oriental peasants in addressing their hereditary chief or superior as "little father," evidently pleased her.

"A change, yes!" she said, thoughtfully. "But none greater than such as we are so constantly the sport or victims of. Our passions are at tempest. Lo, a little sleep, a brief unconsciousness, and we are serene again! Or, just the reverse, we fall to sleep in the lap of peace, only to awake into turmoil and unrest. Change! yes, forever and ever, until the great last change, when we sleep to rouse no more."

The sun in was a very fast one, and the sun was not more than an hour high when *La Caracalla*, with a joyous dash through the fringing surf, began to slip easily in through the larger of the reef-openings noted by the privateersman on this side of the island in their circumnavigation of the preceding day.

Within the bay sparkled peacefully, the steeply-sloping island shores beyond, wooded almost to the water's edge, betraying no more signs of life or habitations than elsewhere.

"You have doubted, little captain," said *La Floramour*, "the sufficiency of my power to overwhelm you and your privateer on occasion. Wait!"

She darted down the companionway, but quickly reappeared.

Slung by an embroidered silken baldric around her waist and shoulder, there was a convoluted horn or bugle of silver and gold, thickly incrustated with precious stones, which she had not worn before.

"You still doubt?" she inquired, regarding Frank with her bright smile.

He gave a preliminary glance around the

man-of-war-like orderliness of the schooner's decks, where her ship's-company of sixty or seventy bearded, stalwart corsairs were all more or less on view, and slightly shrugged his shoulders.

"A superb craft, little mother, and a fine body of men—what there is of them!" was his rather equivocal comment with an answering smile.

She motioned him to expectant attention, and, raising the bugle to her lips, sounded upon it, four clear, ringing blasts, of a peculiar intonation and in rapid succession.

Almost instantly thereafter, an exclamation of wonder broke from the young privateersman.

Boats were swarming out from almost everywhere along the wooded island shores—boats very similar to the strange proa-like craft that had carried him off the preceding midnight and in astonishing numbers.

In a few minutes the bay was dotted with them, swiftly scudding here and there under their odd-looking lateen sails, and every boat seemed to contain from six to a dozen stalwart corsairs armed to the teeth.

It was a strange, unexpected mustering, that could not have been estimated less than thirty boats and three hundred armed men in all.

The flotilla hovered about expectantly, and then, as by a common impulse, every man of it suddenly rose to his feet, and there was a deafening, jubilating cheer.

It was the warlike islanders' greeting to their corsair queen.

"What do you think by this time, little captain?" inquired La Floramour, pleasantly.

"Little mother, your power is truly surprising," was Frank's somewhat evasive reply.

CHAPTER XLII.

THE CORSAIR COMMUNITY.

LA FLORAMOUR, however, seemed to accept the young man's answer as sufficiently satisfactory.

The cheer from the flotilla was responded to by a similar one—ringing, eager, fierce and hearty—from La Caracalla's crew.

The pirate queen then blew a single blast upon her bugle-horn.

It was the signal for dispersion, and in a few minutes the thronging little fleet had vanished as suddenly and mysteriously as it had appeared.

"You are somewhat chary in your acknowledgments, Captain Freeway," then said La Floramour. "But I think I know what is the matter with you. You are hungry."

"Right you are, fair pirates!" cried the young man, heartily. "The fact is that I am little short of famished."

"Little Jago!" she signaled, holding up her hand.

The herculean bearer of the diminutive appellation was before her in an instant.

She spoke a few words in their strange language, and he disappeared forward with the accustomed obeisance.

A few minutes later a turbaned negro, fat, black as a coal, and wearing a supernatural grin, appeared piloting aft the cook, also a negro, who was burdened with a number of dishes, some of them steaming hot, and all hidden beneath chased silver covers.

"Come, little captain," said La Floramour. "You are my guest, not my prisoner."

They followed the blacks into the saloon, and were without further ceremony soon engaged in discussing such a breakfast, of rare and varied viands, as Frank Freeway had never in his life sat down to before.

The negro usher, who was the Floramour's steward, waited upon them with the utmost capability, in obedience to slight signs from his mistress, or anticipating what was wished, and the meal passed almost in perfect silence.

Before they arose, however, there was an incident that was a sufficient proof of a darker or less amiable side to the pirate-queen's character than had yet been manifested to, or perhaps even suspected by, her prisoner-guest.

They were at their coffee and cheroots when the fat blackamoor chanced to stumble, while placing some grapes on the table, so that a bunch of the bursting fruit was thrown upon La Floramour's wide-flowing white trowsers, discoloring them not a little.

"Stupid!" she exclaimed, in a white wrath, and, snatching a heavy silver goblet, she struck him to her feet, inflicting a severe scalp wound, which bled freely.

The poor fellow, however, got upon his feet most unconcernedly, made a submissive salaam, that one might have deemed to be actually expressive of profound gratitude, and silently took himself off to wash up his head.

"My dear Captain Freeway," said Florine, in her most charming manner, "I really do hope that you have managed to make out something of a breakfast."

"Never a better one in my life, my dear Captain Floramour," replied Frank, with such unassumed heartiness as he could command, as following so close upon such a barbarous incident, which his hostess seemed to have forgotten

the instant it had occurred, "many thanks to your truly splendid hospitality."

"Twas nothing. Let us think of ashore then."

They quitted the saloon to find the schooner already moored in the deep pool of a lagoon, or inlet, that showed a mountain rivulet falling in a tinkling cascade at its upper end, and was so shut in by trees that not a glimpse of the adjacent bay was visible.

Stepping ashore, they found awaiting them a couple of leafy-roofed, improvised litters, something after the fashion of Chinese palanquins, only much more comfortable and inviting of appearance, with their bearers—stalwart negroes, naked but for breech-clouts—in patient attendance.

La Floramour spoke a few parting words of instruction to her little Jago, waved her hand to La Caracalla's crew, who were grouped along the bulwarks to witness her departure, and then, springing lightly into one of the conveyances, signed her companion to occupy the other.

He did so, the bearers raised the litters, yoking themselves to their toil, and the journey began at a brisk pace.

At first it was up and up through dense woods, by a broad path which admitted of the travelers being borne side by side, and thus conversing at their ease.

The trees were literally swarming with monkeys, parrots and paroquets, which, however, kept up such an incessant and interminable chatter that anything like a continuous conversation was out of the question.

Flamingoes and other gorgeous birds of more taciturn habits also flashed their vivid forms occasionally here and there amid the lustrous green of the forest.

Presently, however, as the trees grew less dense and there was a corresponding thinning out of the jargon and chattering overhead, La Floramour called out:

"I rather think I have a surprise in store for you, my friend."

Frank's heart gave a glad leap at the suggestion that it might be he was about to be taken to his dear betrothed forthwith, but contented himself with answering cheerfully:

"I am prepared for almost anything conceivable, my dear Captain Floramour."

Then a pause was made on the cleared brow of a windy eminence, at whose foot stretched away a most lovely and charmingly diversified valley, which might have been in the tropical heart of a great continent and hundreds of miles distant from any sea, for any suggestion to the contrary.

Here was doubtless the promised surprise, for in this valley was the chief town or village of the corsair community, and a very considerable one at that.

"Astonishing!" commented Frank, wishing to say something complimentary, and the journey was resumed.

Midway to the village, amid coffee, indigo, banana, plantain, orange and lemon plantations that spoke well of the industry of the community, another halt was made as a man, half-ferocious, half-submissive of mien, came to meet them.

La Floramour spoke a few harsh words, which caused him to skulk away obediently, but not without throwing a malignant look at the privateersman.

"Why, it was that rascal, Dolores Spagoletto's lover!" exclaimed Frank, who had thought the fellow to have remained with his comrades on La Caracalla.

CHAPTER XLIII.

THE EAGLE'S NEST.

LA FLORAMOUR ordered the litter-bearers to proceed, and then turned to her fellow-traveler with a serious look.

"Yes," she said, "it was the little Vallette. Didn't I promise you to discipline him? Well, early this morning, while you still slumbered peacefully under your oilskin, I called him aft, in the presence of La Caracalla's entire crew, and gave him his penalty."

"May I ask what that consists of?"

"Certainly. Compulsory retirement to an exclusive shore-existence here for the term of one year, on peril of his life. It is a sufficient punishment. Not one of my men but would sooner be put to death at once than undergo it. He will be more or less proscribed—the laughing-stock of our women and children—for a twelvemonth."

"Humph! And yet you permitted him to gloat upon me in my bonds before you came to relieve me of them."

She burst into her reckless, musical laugh that at times made him suspect something cold-blooded and heartless in her.

"My last little joke with you, little captain!" she cried, gayly. "However, you didn't frighten the least particle."

"Humph!" observed Frank again, whom these things sent off into a rather uncomfortable or insecure train of reflections. "And, if it is a fair question, little mother, let me ask if you ever do order any of your subjects to be 'put to death at once?'"

"Quite frequently," was the matter-of-fact

reply. "You see, discipline must be maintained on the island with an iron hand, or what would become of my authority? Why do you ask?"

"Well, I can't help wishing that such had been your sentence upon Pierre Vallette, instead of what it was."

"I cannot agree with you. The little Vallette is brave and useful; and besides Dolores Spagoletto might be inconsolable—and he is her lover, without joking—and she is one of the very few women whom I admit to my intimacy."

"Well, it was an uncommonly murderous look that the fellow threw back at me just now. That is all I have got to say."

"That is nothing," lightly. "Besides, you have my cheerful permission to destroy him on sight, should he attempt any black tricks."

Frank said no more, contenting himself perforce with this rather ambiguous reassurance, in which he naturally enough found but slight mitigation of his sense of insecurity.

As they entered the village the entire population, consisting almost entirely of women, girls and children, together with some very old men—the able-bodied males being absent on some expedition or other—came thronging out of neat adobe huts and pretty house-gardens, with acclamations of unaffected joy over their queen's arrival among them.

Many of the girls and younger women were very handsome, and the youngsters, altogether in a state of nature, were as romping, healthful and happy-go-lucky a motley lot, of every shade of complexion imaginable, as could be conceived.

But on the faces of all that were out of childish years Frank was at once struck by that prevailing of unconscious sadness or melancholy which he had remarked among the fierce and bearded crew of the corsair schooner, as the probable result of a fixed and hopeless isolation from the world at large for numerous generations.

They seemed to be very desirous for La Floramour to make a stay among them, but she laughingly refused, and after shedding the largess of her smiles and laugh-words right and left among them, peremptorily ordered a continuance of the journey.

"On to the Eagle's Nest!" she commanded, and on it was.

"Our pirate community—the last descendants of the brave old buccaneers," she said, with more thoughtfulness than her wont, as they were passing out of the village. "Strange, Captain Freeway, but I am never happy save when afloat."

"But they are happy and contented enough. And how they love you!"

"Yes, yes," indifferently; "well enough in their way. And perhaps I would be more among them, but for the brats. I hate children!"

There was a suggestion of callousness in the way this was said that seemed to afford the young man another disagreeable glimpse into the strange being's many-sided character.

"An angel externally," he thought, "perhaps an unrelieved barbarian or tigress within. Let me be careful not to stroke the fur the wrong way."

After quitting the village, the course was up and ever up—for the most part through dense forest-growth, but by means of broad, well-cleared paths—directly toward the mountainous interior.

"Captain Floramour," inquired Frank, at last, "what is the Eagle's Nest you referred to?"

"My nest—my rock-reared mountain perch!" replied the pirate-queen, a wild exultance in her tone. "Am I not the one sea-eagle of these mysterious waters—the one Unconquerable of the ocean solitudes? And can you think of an eagle, my friend, without an eyrie?"

"Ah, I understand; your fastness?"

"Yes; we will see it presently, though from afar."

From the brow of a foot-hill, or mountain spur, which they presently came out upon, she pointed out the fastness to him.

"Why, it's like a castle-tower!" cried Frank, "and evidently built of stone."

"By enslaved Spaniards, at the behest of Red Rowiston the Buccaneer, a lieutenant of the great Henry Morgan, in the brave old days—and out of hewn stone," exclaimed La Floramour, with much complacency and not a little pride.

"Ha! an eagle's nest indeed. Why," reflectively, "from its perch on yonder mountain's craggy side, one ought to be able to look right down into Laguna Sinuosa, as you call it, where the Battle Queen is so securely juggled!"

"You will see," quietly. "Dogs, you tarry over-long," and the mistress of Torremonte nonchalantly leaned out of her litter to cruelly prick one of her bearers in the naked back with her dagger's-point, as one might prick forward an ox with a gad.

The young privateersman turned away his head, to conceal a frown, and perhaps a shudder.

They reached the brow of the next successive

spur, where a longer resting-space was imperatively necessitated, so greatly were the bearers fatigued and blown.

From this point, as from the preceding one, an extensive view of the sea was obtained, and here there was yet another uninviting revelation of La Floramour's singular contradictions of character.

Suddenly an unusual commotion was noticed upon the ocean, and then the mountain—the whole island, for that matter—began to tremble.

The blacks voiced their alarm in loud outcries, and, flinging themselves prostrate, buried their foreheads in the turf.

Frank was looking interestedly seaward, and then there came a second tremor more pronounced than the first.

CHAPTER XLIV.

LA FLORAMOUR'S ODD IDEA OF PLEASANTY.

"WHY, it's only a slight earthquake!" commented Frank, as if thinking aloud, and without turning his head. "Odd enough what cowards it makes of these blacks, who ought to be used to such tremors by this time, and—"

A sort of gasping exclamation caused him to turn, and then supreme astonishment held him.

The exclamation was from La Floramour, who was half out of her litter, and trembling like a leaf.

La Floramour, white to the lips, quivering, knock-kneed, wild-eyed—the image incarnate of absolute, unreasoning, ignoble fear!

"Temblor! temblor! The earthquake! the earthquake!" she screamed, as there came yet another tremor, and she was out of the litter with a terrified bound. "Oh, my God in Heaven! the earthquake, the earthquake!"

Then, with a last scarcely perceptible shiver, the convulsion passed, the sea resumed its wonted aspect, the mountain was once more immovable, and all was over.

Instantly recovering her accustomed equanimity, La Floramour laughed lightly, and struck a flint for lighting a fresh cheroot, while the negroes likewise rose unconcernedly, and prepared to resume their burdens as if nothing had interrupted the even tenor of the journey.

"Ah, little captain, you are new to these parts!" she laughed, stepping back into her palanquin, without a particle of shame for her abject cowardice of a moment before. "The more one experiences this sort of thing the less is he used to it. On, black dogs! you do but creep." And there was yet another prodding exhibition at the expense of one of the unfortunate blacks.

Frank Freeway kept his own counsel, while pondering deeply, during which he recalled the analogous terror as manifested by Dolores Spagoletto's lover on board the privateer.

Two hours later, and with no further interruption or incident worth noting, they arrived at the Eagle's Nest.

The fastness was of considerable extent, overlooking an immense stretch of sea, and it seemed a marvel how it could ever have been reared there, partly masked by trees, and clinging as it did to the precipitous brow of the loftiest peak on the island.

"Come with me, my friend," said La Floramour; and, as a first step toward making him acquainted with the spot, she led him out upon a broad terrace.

"Magnificent!" exclaimed Freeway, enraptured forthwith with the tremendous outlook. "Mountain and sea air blended with a vengeance, as you might say. And yonder is the Wraith in the quiet bay."

"Nay; but look not out, but down."

An exclamation burst from him, as he obeyed.

The Battle Queen, in her lagune imprisonment, was at his very feet, though far, far below—a literal bird's-eye view.

In the glades of the forested slopes embosoming the ship, shore-camps had been improvised, where officers and tars appeared to be fraternizing with the natives.

"Do you interdict the Britishers to that circumscribed area down in there?" inquired Frank.

"Yes," was the reply, "though the islanders are permitted to mingle with them under certain restrictions. Sailors as they are, they could scarcely surmount the mountain-walls inclosing them, without intelligent guidance, which I take care shall not be forthcoming, save at my caprice. Oh, they are securely shut in down there!"

"Yes," Frank was trying to trace the inland course of the lagune with the utmost interest; "I don't see any way by which the ship could be taken out through the island."

The pirate queen made no answer, seemingly absorbed in reverie.

A number of armed men had come out to meet them from the fastness, and now one of these approached, preceded by a boldly beautiful woman whom Frank at once recognized as the one whom he had seen with Jessie on La Caracalla, and who at once flew into Florine's arms with every demonstration of affectionate greeting.

"Captain Freeway," said La Floramour, when

kisses and some words had been exchanged by the meeting pair, "this is my best friend, Dolores Spagoletto."

Frank bowed a little impatiently, while Dolores rewarded him with a searchingly inquisitive stare.

"But look here, Captain Floramour," he cried out, "when am I going to be brought to Miss Heartwell?"

"How do you know that you are to be brought to her at all?" Florine banteringly answered him, and yet with a peculiar look also, which he did not like, remembering the serpent-and-tiger suggestions as to her possibilities.

"I have your word!" he said.

"No, you forget," still with the strange look or smile. "You rejected it when it was freely offered you; now you are here—perforce. However," laughing, "don't have any unnecessary fears as to meeting the young lady. Come, then."

Preceded by the corsair guard, and with her arm still around her Dolores, she led the way to the fastness entrance, the privateersman hopefully following.

They entered the tower, threaded a stone corridor, and came to a pause before a heavy iron door, which Florine signed the man to unbolt and open.

This being done, she entered alone with Freeway a large, square, dungeon-like apartment, dimly lighted by narrow slit-like windows, and seemingly hewn out of the solid rock, which formed its sides, floor and roof.

"How does this place impress you, Captain Freeway—as a lover's tryst, we will say?" she asked, with a repetition of her disturbing look.

"Not altogether agreeably," he answered, shortly.

She laughed, waving her hand to the man and woman who had remained at the entrance.

Instantly the place was absolutely darkened, and there was the sound of her swiftly-retreating steps.

"Trapped!" cried a voice, accompanied by a scream of laughter, in the Spagoletto woman's accents.

And then there was the clang of the iron door, and the shooting of the bolts.

For almost the first time in his life, Frank Freeway felt a thrill of unrelieved hopelessness and dismay.

Jessie—his brave ship's company—what was to become of them with him, the entrapped lover, the kidnapped chief, perhaps at the cruel mercy of a beautiful and all-powerful woman with a fiend's heart, an enigma of beauty, mystery, and, perhaps, barbarous treachery as well?

But it was only for an instant.

Then the dungeon-room suddenly brightened with a much more vivid daylight than had illuminated it in the first instance—the change being effected, as he noticed, by a removal of dense boughs of foliage from outside the slit-like windows—and he looked about him.

He now for the first time remarked that the loopholes were barred with heavy, rusty iron gratings, that iron rings, with heavy shackles attached—doubtless the relics of buccaneering imprisonment and torture from a long-past era—were fixed to the stone walls at intervals, and that another iron door was directly opposite to the one that had closed him in.

Then this door abruptly opened, and La Floramour entered with her bright, reckless laugh, followed by Dolores, as Frank supposed, having no eyes (furiously incensed eyes just now) for aught but the pirate queen herself.

"Only one of my jokes, little captain!" she cried, all but throwing herself into his arms, while still laughing immoderately. "But I really would not have caused you distress. Hal ha, hal! What do you think of my idea of pleasantry?"

"This is what I think of it!" hoarsely. She was suddenly helpless in his powerful clutch—despite her own great strength, though she offered not to struggle or resist—her own dagger, snatched by the infuriated privateersman from her sash, at her white throat. "Sorceress—she-devil—cockatrice—whatsoever you are! trickery with me is a dangerous business."

She looked at him composedly, and then continued to shake with her mad merriment.

It was sufficiently evident that the earthquake-terror was her sole weakness in the fear line.

"Better and better!" she laughed. "But, little captain, you are a fool not to look for the kindness behind the trick."

"Frank! Frank!" called a faltering, but dearly beloved, though long silent voice. "Oh, my darling!"

He looked around with a start, releasing Florine, and dropped the poniard.

Could he credit his eyes?

It was not the Spagoletto woman, after all, who had followed the mistress of the Eagle's Nest into the dungeon-hall, but—

"Jessie! Jessie!" cried the young man, wildly.

And then the reunited lovers were in each other's arms.

"Come, my pretty ones!" interposed La Floramour, when their first transports had some-

what subsided, and without a trace of resentment in her voice or manner; "this is scarcely the spot for such a scene. Come with me."

CHAPTER XLV.

RED LETTER DAYS.

LA FLORAMOUR forthwith conducted the lovers to a most charming and luxurious apartment, though furnished antequely, or in a manner to suggest the old sea-and-town plundering days, and hung round with portraits, chiefly of stern-featured men—corsair chieftains of a past age, it would seem, and many of them in corsets and half-mail.

"My ancestral hall!" she said, a little proudly, when the lovers were agreeably bestowed. "Little friends, this is your privileged withdrawing apartment while you remain my guests which may not be for very long."

She still held in her hand the dagger, as she had picked it up from the dungeon-pavement, and was curiously examining the deadly point which had so threatened her fair white throat but a few moments before.

"So near, so near!" she murmured, darting a level glance at the sailor-lover. "Do you know, my friend, that I must think a good deal of you! for I am not resentful in the least, and up to this hour no man has ever threatened Florine La Floramour by word or deed—with pistol-muzzle or dagger-point, or even by a sworded look—and lived to remember his temerity. However," laughing, "here is my seal to forgiveness."

She ran to him, kissing him gayly, and then kissed his sweetheart, with an added embrace.

"Now come here!"

She led them to a broad mullioned casement that overlooked the lagune-abyss in which the sloop-of-war lay imprisoned, the coral-inclosed bay beyond, wherein the privateer still swung at peaceful anchor, though still with altered environs, and the great, brilliant ocean wilderness yet further beyond.

"You note your gallant schooner, Captain Freeway, but under altered circumstances. No?"

"Yes," cried Frank, "I should say so. Boats are passing and repassing between her and the beach, with your island women and striplings on board, and the outgoing ones laden with fruits and poultry. Ah, a good feeling already established!"

"Doesn't that explain itself? A message as to your safety has already reached your ship's company from me. There should be red-letter days for both of you right here for a month to come, with another kiss for Jessie. "In the mean time, everything at the Eagle's Nest is at your command."

With a pleasant smile, she took herself off, and the lovers saw little more of her, and only at infrequent intervals, during the happy, dreamful and truly red-letter days that thereupon succeeded one another, in an unbroken stream of golden hours, with only the ribboned and garlanded barque of youthful love upon its enchanted tide.

At the end of about a fortnight, however, when Frank Freeway, though by no means tired of his silken fetters, was beginning to think that he ought at least to pay a flying visit to his vessel, and when he was still in uncertainty as to the pirate queen's intentions regarding his sweetheart and himself, a somewhat disturbing incident occurred.

It was now past midwinter, the most delightful season of the north-equatorial American tropics, though likewise the rainy period, and marked by frequent hurricanes.

These latter are, however, mostly of a local character, and Torremonto had thus far been especially free from severe visitations of the sort.

Walking alone upon the terrace at daybreak, one morning about this time, he saw a man toilsomely scaling the cliffs and steepes reaching up from Laguna Sinuosa.

The circumstance was in itself disturbing, inasmuch as the Britishers were supposed to be still, sequestered by edict to their lagune-confinement, while the inclosing steepes were, moreover, thought to be inaccessible.

Then, just as the man was disappearing over the summit, a considerable distance away, Frank caught a glimpse of his face, which by no means lessened his sense of insecurity.

La Floramour chancing to appear on the terrace a few minutes later, he at once acquainted her with what he had seen.

"This is serious," she commented, with unusual gravity. "It might go bad with Lord Oldcourt should I find him disregarding my injunctions."

"But this may more nearly concern me, personally."

"Hal! you recognized the cliff-scaler?"

"For a surety."

"What! it was the little Vallette?"

"It was."

"And your former suspicions with regard to this man! Look you, my friend, this shall be my care."

"Oh, Florine!" cried the young man, passionately; "when are you going to permit me to—"

end this uncertainty once for all, as you can with a word?"

"How—and in what way?"

"By letting me set off homeward with Jessie on my privateer without further delay."

"Little captain," with much earnestness, "you must by this believe me to be your true friend and Jessie's, too?"

"Yes; I can no longer doubt that."

"Then assuredly she will never be your passenger, for her Northland home, on the Sea Wraith."

"What do you mean, La Floramour?" in a startled tone. "And why not?"

"Because she is not yet your wife, nor can become such before quitting this island, where marriages," with a smile, "are rather—unceremonious. What! is it left for La Floramour, the Female Buccaneer, to instruct the chivalrous American sailor, Frank Freeway, in the proprieties of life as affecting a pure young woman's spotless name and fame?"

Frank acquiesced in the rebuke by hanging his head without answering.

"More of this at another time," continued Florine, somewhat peremptorily. "Jessie passed yonder along the cliffs for a stroll a few moments back. Seek your betrothed, my friend."

Frank hastened away in the direction indicated—which chanced to be toward the spot where he had seen Pierre Vallette disappear after his ascent—and without suspecting that she was secretly—jealously, one might almost have said—dogging his steps at a distance.

Arriving at last at a favorite lover's-nook on the extreme edge of a tremendous cliff, where he had often sat and dreamed with Jessie in the past few golden days, but without finding her there, the privateersman was turning inquiringly toward the adjacent thicket, when there was a whistling, hurtling sound, as of an arrow in flight, and then a hoarse, infuriated snarl, like that of an infuriated wild beast, directly behind him.

He turned to behold a uniquely terrible spectacle.

Glaringly confronting him from the dizzy edge, with a huge dagger still upraised, as it had doubtless just been lifted for stabbing him in the back, was Dolores Spagoletto's lover, himself in the death-agony, his breast transfixed by La Floramour's jewel-bilted poniard, which had just quitted her uperring hand, hurled javelin fashion, from where she was still standing in the cliff-path a rod or two distant.

CHAPTER XLVI.

LAST DAYS AT TORREMENTO.

IN another instant the would-be assassin, thus cut off in the very moment of his intended crime, toppled headlong out over the cliff, with a last snarling cry of baffled hate and revenge.

Florine rushed forward, and grasped the astonished privateersman by the hand. He noticed that she was very pale.

"God be praised!" she exclaimed; "you are saved."

"Thanks to you, little mother."

"Now, at least, you cannot doubt my disinterestedness, for all my mad pranks."

"No, no; never again, Florine."

But here there was a scream, and Dolores, who uttered it, and Jessie were seen hurrying from the thicket's edge.

A single glance was proof that both had witnessed the brief tragedy.

The Spagoletto woman, white and wild-eyed, was half beside herself.

"Revenge—I shall have it!" she shrieked, with a terrible look for Frank. "Oh, my brave Pierre! my poor murdered love!" looking shudderingly down over the cliff; "see where his dear body hangs there—impaled on the cruel cactus spines! Murdered, and for an accursed American sailor!"

"Be quiet, you!" said La Floramour, also looking down, and now wholly herself again.

"There, it has dropped into the abyss—and my jeweled dagger with it," regretfully. "If it was the Englishman, Oldcourt, that sent him up, it is Oldcourt that shall answer for it. What!" as Dolores drew shudderingly back; "and you really did love him?" contemptuously.

"Love him?" the Spagoletto burst forth afresh. "You to ask it, with your heart of stone, your breast of ice! My good, my brave Pierre!"

"Brave?—a skulking assassin!" sternly. "But no more!"

"My brave, my murdered love!"

"No more, I say, raving fool! It was by my hand."

"But for him!" and the frenzied Dolores pointed menacingly at Frank; "the American, the stranger. Oh, I will be revenged—he shall feel me through her!" and the pointing menace shifted toward the affrighted Jessie.

"Be quiet!"

"I will not!" shrieked the Spagoletto. "Oh, if not by dagger, then by poisoned cup—"

La Floramour sprang upon her like a tigress, whirling her aloft, notwithstanding that she was a heavy woman, in her powerful grasp, like the merest doll.

"Another syllable, and you follow him into the abyss!"

But by this time the unhappy Dolores was in hysterics, wailing and weeping feebly as she was contemptuously cast upon the ground, and with bruising violence, at that.

"Go!"

Then she picked herself up, and drew away, conquered, crushed—at least for the time being.

La Floramour was once more her composed, almost her gay, self.

"Perhaps a fortunate morning's work, this!" she observed. "It may expedite many things. Meet me in the portrait-room, you two, an hour or two hence."

She then kissed the lovers gayly, and hurried away.

She did not appear with them at breakfast, and, shortly afterward, when they were awaiting her presence in the portrait-room, they perceived by one of the rearward windows Dolores Spagoletto, who was setting out down the mountain-side, equipped most likely for a journey at short notice to the pirate village, and followed by a black, shoudering a great hamper-like chest, which might contain her clothing, finery and other belongings, of which the woman was known to possess a large and rich collection.

She wore a mournful, sullen air, and once threw back at the fastness a glance that was probably full of tears, but on the whole seemed to accept her fate rather philosophically.

There was a light step behind them, and then La Floramour was at the window between them.

"Yes," she said, with a grave smile, "I have banished her."

"And she was your favorite, too!" cried Frank, regretfully. "How sorry I am!"

"No fault of yours, and not to be helped. Besides, there is many an amiable young woman among my people—and even here at Eagle's Nest—whom I have too long neglected for Lora's sake. A pretty and lively animal, too, was Dolores, though only an animal. I shall miss her," thoughtfully. "We were playmates as little children."

"Can it be?" incredulously. "But the Spagoletto is surely much your senior—a woman of thirty-odd."

"And how old am I?" with a laugh. "Guess."

"Four or five and twenty, at the utmost."

"With you, my young friends, I would have no secrets, even in my woman's privilege or weakness. I am six-and-thirty, and to spare."

Both Frank and Jessie expressed their astonishment, and yet there had been times, as perhaps now, when La Floramour's radiant youthful beauty and bloom had suggested the possibility of such a thing.

"Now will you tell me your secret history?" Florine suddenly asked, turning upon Frank most abruptly.

"With all my heart," he replied, after a pause to collect himself. "Let us sit there by that other window-seat. It is shadier."

In a short time La Floramour's curiosity was gratified, so far as it was possible for the young man to supply the particulars.

"What a strange woman is your mother!" she observed, after listening with the profoundest interest. "I can hardly conceive of such unnaturalness, my own mother was so different, though early taken from me. But perhaps she suffered some great wrong, or imagines that she did. Incomprehensible women are not to be judged hastily. What kind of a man was your father?"

"I just recollect him as a good and easy man, though perhaps a rough and wild one—always a sea-rover and adventurer, like myself."

"I also just remember my father. I have his miniature, which I may one day show you, but not now. Here is my mother's portrait. Come here, and look at it."

CHAPTER XLVII.

HURRYING ON.

SHE led them before a portrait which they had repeatedly admired as the most attractive there—that of a singularly beautiful woman, picturesquely costumed, evidently a pirate's, also.

"My mother!" observed Floramour, simply. "Tis from her that I inherit the island and its government."

"What!" exclaimed Frank; "I thought it was from your father."

"Not so. Like yours," with a strange look, "he was—a rough and wild one, always a sea-rover and adventurer—a stranger among our people."

"This is quite a coincidence. You say you have his portrait."

"You may see it in good time," evasively. "And you think it possible that you may, through your father, be the true heir of the Oldcourt titles and estates, as the descendant of the missing eldest son."

"I only know and can conjecture from what I have told you."

"This would account for much of Oldcourt's animosity, even apart from your rivalry in love."

"True."

"That signet ring?" pointing to it.

"You know as much of it as I do. It was my father's, seldom if ever quitting his hand till his death."

"I know—that is," catching her breath, "such would naturally be the case. Ah, if your strange mother would but unseal her lips!"

"But she will not."

"There are papers you think—proofs of your descent and legitimacy?"

"I have acquainted you with my reasons for believing it."

"My children, no more of this." Florine rose abruptly. "Continue your love-dream uninterruptedly."

"Florine, when and how is it to end, as it must end?" cried Frank, while Jessie also looked up expectantly.

"By leaving my island, you mean?"

"Of course."

"So soon tired of one another, you turtle doves?" smiling.

They laughed their protests.

"So tired of me then?" with the first real sadness in her tone that either of them had ever noticed.

"No, no!" exclaimed the young man; "not that. Only—"

"Peace! I understand. The northern lily shall be returned to her native land under capable escort—in season."

A return of the old suspicion of double-dealing flashed upon Frank.

"You are not thinking of that villain Oldcourt?" he began.

"Idiot! would he return her thither?"

"Ah, doubtless not."

"Don't name him again to me, then!" almost angrily. "I hate that man!"

"It is reassuring to have you say so, Florine. And yet he doubtless believes in you as simply keeping Jessie here in trust for him."

"Let him continue so to believe."

"And you accepted her custody at his desire."

"For my own reasons. No more of this, now. Continue in your lovers' or fools' paradise—gather ye roses while ye may. Ye will have warning ere the cloud rises, ere the petals fall."

And she left them to themselves with her accustomed abruptness.

But Florine was wrong there. The end came without warning, and was not without its surprise even for herself.

Another fortnight of loving, if somewhat uneasy bliss, and then Frank Freeway, on seeking the lookout terrace for his wonted sunrise view, gave vent to a shout of supreme astonishment—of supreme amazement.

The Battle Queen was no longer in her lagoon-confinement—the Battle Queen was outside the island, even outside the reef, off the southeastern extremity, and already heading around under a vast sheeting of canvas and before a stiff breeze, with the evident intention of blockading the privateer inside the western barrier, and perhaps carrying her by boarding assault or boat-attack.

Frank cast but one look at his own vessel—peaceful at her land-locked anchorage, and wholly unsuspecting of her peril—and then rushed back to the fastness.

"Florine! Florine!" he shouted, rushing toward her apartments; "treason! treachery! You are betrayed, no less than I!"

She was just issuing from her sleeping-room, with a couple of pretty young islanders who were now her attendants, and quickened her pace toward the young man, whose pale, excited looks must have startled her sufficiently, even without the shouted alarm which was already setting the entire fastness astir—armed men and frightened women running into the corridors.

"You must be mad!" she exclaimed. "What is it?"

He told her.

"Come!"

And she hurried with him to the terrace.

"This shall be paid for!" as her swift glance took in the astounding situation. "Paid for! paid for!" hissing the iteration between her grinding teeth. "However, leave it all to me. My plans are simply expedited—hurried on."

"You knew of the lagoon's eastern outlet by which the sloop must have been pulled through?"

"Yes; and but one or two others. There has been treachery, as you said, treachery to me!—Jessie (the frightened young girl was there, with man others) 'return to your room and make ready to descend the mountain. My women will assist you. Hasten! hasten!' and, as the girl hurried away, she gave certain orders to her followers, which were acted upon instantly."

In half an hour she was prepared to descend with Jessie in litters, and with a suitable escort.

Frank was about to accompany them, but La Floramour shook her head.

"You will follow down with the main body of the household some hours later," she commanded.

"Florine, I refuse to tarry!" exclaimed the

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young privateersman, pallid with stern resolution. "You may order my death, but otherwise I rejoin my ship at once."

"So you shall, and with a fighting force of islanders at your back, if you choose—but at my pleasure. You shall then even be guided across the island to your vessel by a short cut. Do I not tell you to leave it to me?"

"But in a few hours the big Britisher will attack my schooner through the inlet!"

"Not successfully—not before you are there with a hundred braves to help beat them off."

"What is your plan?"

"To carry Jessie home on La Caracalla."

"To Quogue Beach?"

"To the world's end, if need were."

"Well; and in the mean time?"

"To let Oldcourt perceive my intention. If in the midst of his attack upon your men, he will relinquish it to follow after me—for at least long enough to let your privateer ship out into blue water, whence she can defy him."

"But La Caracalla will have to be got in readiness, and—"

"La Caracalla is always in readiness. Obey me, or all is lost. You can rejoin me at her moorings before high noon."

"One word more! You answer for all that you have promised?"

"With my life! Away!"

Frank snatched a parting kiss from his betrothed, and acquiesced, though with a wildly anxious heart.

Two or three hours later, he in his turn began the descent of the mountain, with the remainder of the Eagle's Nest household.

When half-way down, there was a gun from seaward to the north.

Then, on coming out upon a spur whence the sea and island shores were partly visible in that quarter, the Battle Queen could be seen in the offing, firing shots, and with her boats preparing to storm the inlet.

However, she had to keep far out, by reason of the surf and sunken rocks, the inlet was too narrow for more than two boats to make the passage abreast, and the privateer could be perceived to be ready for anything by this time.

"Hurry on! hurry on!" shouted the young commander, and the descent was resumed in mad haste.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

HARD KNOCKS.

WHEN the island village was reached, Jessie and La Floramour were waiting there for the young commander, the entire community seemingly already under arms, or busied with warlike preparations.

"Did I not tell you that all would be well?" said the pirate queen, extending her hand.

"But that cannonading! it is increasing every minute."

"And at four-mile range."

"And La Caracalla?"

"Is already in the bay. Jessie and I but awaited your coming to go on board."

"Those men yonder?" and Frank indicated a large body of armed corsairs drawn up at the end of the village street.

"Your reinforcement for the relief of the Sea Wraith's crew. The man with the blue sash is to be your guide." She made a signal. "He is coming to make your acquaintance. In less than an hour you should be across the island."

Frank had already clasped Jessie's hand, and was impatiently starting toward his novel command when La Floramour detained him.

"Wait!" she said; "there is something for you yet to see."

A funeral procession of much simplicity, at the sight of which Jessie shuddered and hid her eyes, was slowly approaching.

Men were bearing on a rude bier a woman's corpse, dressed in white and strewn with flowers, but with a red cross cut into its forehead, and some weeping women were following.

At a sign from Florine the procession came to a pause, and she drew Frank Freeway forward to gaze upon the bier's ghastly occupant, which he did in horror and surprise.

A corpse, yes—the corpse of Dolores Spagolotto!

"This mutilation of the forehead!" exclaimed the young man; "what does it mean?"

"That she was a murderess, or attempted murder, which is the same thing by Torremonto's unwritten law."

"Murder?"

"Yes; she was all penitence when we arrived, tired and half-famished, at the mountain's foot, pleaded for forgiveness, and beseeched me to let her prepare us a meal. The coffee was brought, and my suspicions were fortunately aroused. 'Drink this, you!' I said, snatching your Jessie's cup, and forcing it to the Spagolotto's lips at my dagger's point. She obeyed, and in five minutes was—as you see her there. Sad, too! Dolores had been my friend—so gay, so full of life—was my playmate as a child."

She signed again, and the rude procession passed on.

Frank was again intent on hurrying away, when La Floramour once more detained him.

"Look!" And she drew him to one side, whence he could see yet another ghastly sight, though of a somewhat dissimilar horror, through a vista of the adjacent forest.

It was the body of a man hanging by the neck from a lofty limb, the hands and feet missing.

"Another illustration of Torremonto's unwritten laws?" queried the by this time thoroughly disgusted master of the Sea Wraith privateer.

"The traitor who piloted the Battle Queen out of Laguna Sinuosa," she explained, indifferently. "Now good-by. Yet wait!" she thrust a small packet into his hand.

"What is this?"

"My father's portrait."

"Yes?"

"You are only to look at it when we chance to meet again—in your mother's presence."

"In my mother's presence?"

"I have said it. Do you promise?"

"I do."

Then they separated, Freeway hurrying away at the head of the reinforcement, after a parting embrace of his sweetheart; the latter and La Floramour to board La Caracalla, impatiently awaiting them in the bay.

The pirate queen had misstated nothing as to the short cut across the island.

It was a terribly arduous march through the forested heart of the outlying mountain-spurs in the meridian heat of the day, but it was accomplished within an hour, the expedition coming out near the overthrown rock at the lagoon's mouth.

A tremendous greeting cheer burst from the privateer, which had been advised as to what to expect; and it was answered in kind by the hoarse voices of the braves, who at once began to fill the flotilla of proa-like skimmers, provided against their arrival by the keen foresight of their daring mistress.

Never had reinforcement been more opportune, for the critical moment was at hand.

The Wraith, withdrawn well back across the bay, in order to lengthen the range of the Battle Queen's guns—she lying broadside on about three miles off the reef, and pouring out her shots, though for the most part ineffectually—was devoting her fire almost exclusively to the enemy's eight boats, crammed with boarders, that were swiftly approaching her over the inclosed waters, amid the huzzas of their fighting tars—two others having been sunk by the privateer's guns, and their crews gone to the sharks, at the reef-inlet passage.

But not a boarder of that gallant and enthusiastic British expedition was destined to reach the privateer's deck.

At this juncture, there was another hoarse cheer—a cheer with something indescribably cruel and remorseless in it—and then, their proa-like crafts winging out to the counter-attack like so many eagles, the corsair-braves of Torremonto—the savage descendants of the fearless and merciless old buccaneers—were among the outnumbered and overmatched man-of-war's-men with a fury and irresistibility that meant just no quarter and fat pickings for the sharks.

It soon became a slaughter, rather than a battle, and Frank Freeway seized an early opportunity to spring aboard his schooner, and into the arms of his overjoyed ship's company.

"A telescope!" was his first demand, when he could escape from the showering congratulations. "Quick!" bringing the proffered glass to his eye. "Ha! La Caracalla making seaward, with both Florine and Jessie plainly visible, and from almost under the big ship's bows. Wait! yes; there's the recall signal."

This was true. As La Caracalla sheered out for the open, the Battle Queen was seen to be frantically signaling for the return of her boats, while making hurried preparations for the pursuit.

But two of her ten original boats, however, and those fuller of the wounded than of able men, lived to respond to the recall.

As for the rest—well, the sharks of Torremonto had not been so gorged for many a long day, and the victorious islanders were busy washing their slaughter-ensanguined arms and persons, while singing their wild songs or shouting their rude jests in the jargon that was still more or less incomprehensible to the majority of their American allies.

"About ship, and let's get out of this company!" ordered Frank, as soon as he had explained the situation. "Pirates may be good enough in their way, but, thank the Lord! it isn't our way."

Thanks and leave-takings were accordingly expedited, and by the middle of the afternoon it was good-by to Torremonto, the privateer standing well out to sea in the wake of the Battle Queen, then but little more than a speck on the northern sea-line, out beyond which La Caracalla, the leader of that strange three-handed, long-distance ocean race for Quogue Beach, had long since disappeared.

"But look here!" cried Horner. "Can Oldcourt possibly hope to overtake that witch-craft of La Floramour's?"

"My boy," old Seth Stratton took it upon himself to reply, somewhat sententiously, "it's

a long, long voyage ahead, with many a wild storm between in this winter season, and the Battle Queen is a big strong ship, while La Caracalla—ain't."

CHAPTER XLIX.

TOUGH VOYAGING.

SETH STRATTON proved himself no bad prophet in his forecast of what was before the Sea Wraith in this last voyage of her memorable initial cruise.

January, February and March of the year 1813 made up a season scarcely preceded in the South and West Atlantic for continuous and calamitous storms.

Beaten helplessly about by contrary gales, the privateer was all of those three months in reaching the vicinity of the New Jersey Coast, and without once again coming in sight of either of her forerunners in the race northward after the first night that closed in on her with the pirate island astern.

To make matters worse, in the way of delay having got this far north, she fell in with small British armed brig conveying four merchantmen, which she could not in professional honor forego the temptation of making prizes of.

This she finally succeeded in doing, but not before the Britisher had made a smart fight, in the course of which one man on the privateer, and he a non-combatant—Mr. Midshipman Bagley—was shot through the body.

"Don't take it so to heart, Jason," said the poor young fellow to Horner, who, with others, was sorrowing over his last moments. "It is tough, this being done for by one's own countrymen, if even by a blind shot, and I had hoped to see my mother and sisters again in Merry England, but (this for them, old fellow," handing over a package of keepsakes) "the run of luck, my boy, the run of luck!" with the old reckless smile struggling up through the shadows. "And, dash it all, a true sailor's mausoleum is the deep—that has cradled him so long on its wild bosom—when all is over and done! God bless and keep you, Horner! Good-by, Freeway—and a brave free way is your own. Stratton—all of you—a messmate's farewell, though at war our nations be. Uncle Bob—Blowlock, my hearty! what, tears—and for me? Ah, if we—could have but—but one more hob-and-nob together with that blessed old Jamaica and lemon. But—it—was—n't—to—be."

"As fine, rollickin' a young sailor as ever tumbled a bumper or made love to a gal!" half sobbed Uncle Bob, starting to his feet when all was over. "Blow me up fur a balloon-fish ef he warn't!"

And he stumped off forward, lugubriously tooting his boatswain's whistle for such consolation as he could extract from it.

Having disposed of her prizes, the Wraith once more sheeted northward, finally making Quogue Beach and gaining the shelter of Shinnecock Bay at the close of a stormy day in the beginning of April, with the promise of a worse night in prospect.

Frank made all haste ashore, accompanied solely by Horner, as his most appreciative and sympathetic friend in the private business that was probably awaiting him, for an instinctive feeling urged him in the direction of his mother's house.

Quogue Village had been rebuilt, and, while making inquiries for a conveyance to Sag Harbor, the young man was told that Aunt Dolly Blowlock was a resident of her rehabilitated cottage, and in improved health.

Hurrying hither, with his friend, Frank had hardly entered the gate when Jessie Heartwell rushed into his arms.

"What, Jessie! God is, indeed, good to me!" exclaimed her lover, when their first shy transports were mastered, and the midshipman had been introduced.

"Yes, yes! but oh, Frank, you must lose no time in hurrying to your mother's. La Floramour is there by this time and—perhaps Lord Oldcourt, too."

"What!" almost with a shout.

"Yes, yes! We arrived in Sag Harbor in La Caracalla this morning—and—and Florine made me come right here; and—and the Battle Queen was reported as being off Montauk."

A few more explanations, a hurried caress, and Frank dashed away with his friend.

The conveyance was secured, and the road to Sag Harbor finally covered in a whirling spring storm of wind and rain.

It was late at night when they approached the Widow ~~Stratton's~~ ~~second~~ old colonial house, which was nevertheless lighted up and unusual.

"What is the occasion of Frank of Anna's, the faithful old slave-woman, who was one of the first to greet him, as he entered. "My mother?"

"For de Lor', Marse Frank, I fear she done be dying!" was the frightened answer.

"Dying? Mother wasn't of the expiring sort, I am sure. Where is she?"

"In de state drawin'-room."

"Dying, and in the drawing-room?"

"Yes; along wif de bootiful wild lady, an' de

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doctor, an' de heap ob papers—de secret papers I done tole you 'bout, honey."

Signing the servant to help Mr. Horner make himself at home, Frank hurriedly entered the state apartment indicated.

The first to step forward and grasp his hand was La Floramour, richly attired in habiliments solely pertaining to her sex, her face wearing an incomprehensible half-smile.

Mrs. Freeway was propped up in a huge invalid-chair, the family physician at her side.

Her stateliness was a thing of the past, she was apparently really dying, and with a new softness and even humility in her aspect, which it was good to see replace the old hardness even at that expense.

"Stroke of paralysis!" the physician managed to whisper to Frank apart. "Be patient and gentle. The end is not far off."

CHAPTER L. CONCLUSION.

THE dying woman feebly signed her son to approach.

"Kiss me, Frank," she murmured. "That is, if you can kiss such an unnatural mother as I have been to you."

"Oh, mother, mother!" and then she was in his powerful arms, his tears raining down on her death-blighted face; my mother, my own mother at last!

"Ah, but you would always have been noble and forgiving, had I only let you! But time flies—let me speak—let me make amends while I can."

"My son, I have been wicked, unnatural, but my life has been blasted and warped by a great mistake. That strange and noble young woman," indicating Florine, "has set me right at last."

"It was my retribution, for even with the shock of my awakening there came this stroke from heaven that is swiftly killing me."

"Listen. I thought your father unfaithful to me—to be rendering homage to another love in some far, fair foreign land, and swore to be revenged."

"Even after his death, I came to hate his memory, and I was possessed by the continued desire for revenge upon it, through and upon you, my innocent son."

"How? Your father was heir, through the elder branch, to the great English estate and title of the Barons of Oldcourt. This was, indeed, my first grievance against him. For he had let me into the secret almost from the first, and then maddened by his refusal to assert his claims, the papers in proof of which were in his possession. But he hated titles—was too thorough an American to care for aught but his beloved flag—while I, being English-born, was wild to obtain the aristocratic state and wealth to which by my marriage I felt myself entitled."

"My entreaties, however, had never been able to move him. In addition to his infidelity, or what I fancied as such, and which he would never take the trouble to deny circumstantially, he declared that his secret should perish with him, and that you, his heir, if in the future you should so desire, should alone make good the foreign claims. In this notion, without telling you his secret—he trusted in me for that—he gave the heirloom signet-ring into your childish keeping, having had a rude duplicate made of it abroad. Then he went off upon his last voyage, which was destined only to end with his death."

"How have I been revenged? By steadfastly keeping from you the secret of the ring. Oh, my son! can you forgive my wickedness at this solemn hour? Such reparation as is left me I make. Yonder," pointing to a heap of antiquated documents, "are the proofs that will establish your rightful claims, beyond the shadow of a doubt, in any court in England."

"Through that lady's urgency," again pointing to Florine, "I make the restitution. It was from her lips that I have learned how cruelly I wronged my husband. That which I had deemed his infidelity was an old marriage which he had contracted far away before he knew me, and which had been dissolved by the death of his conjugal partner."

"Florine—Florine knows and has proofs of all. The duplicate heirloom is in her possession. She—she was born years before you, my son, and—doubtless by a noble woman who—who was a far better wife and mother than I have ever been. Forgive, forgive! Florine, your half-sister—" she could not continue.

"My half-sister!" faltered out the astounded young man.

"The packet!" cried Florine. "Open it now, and look upon the portrait it contains."

Frank tremblingly obeyed.

"My father's—my own father's face!" he exclaimed, wildly, after glancing at the miniature.

"And my father's face!" said Florine, impressively.

They grasped each other's hands, but at that instant a gasping, feeble sound called them to the invalid.

"Your forgiveness, my son!" was all that the dying woman could say.

Frank hastened to bestow it most earnestly,

and a moment later his mother was dead in his arms.

Florine reverently covered over the marble face.

"Better secure those papers forthwith, Captain Freeway," observed the physician, a little later on. "They are your birthright, as I understand it, and if accidentally or maliciously destroyed—"

Here a heavy trampling was heard in the adjoining hall, and, as Frank was laying his hand on the papers, Horner's and another voice were heard in violent expostulation and dispute, while there was likewise a clamor of servants' voices.

Then the door was burst open, and Lord Oldcourt and the midshipman came in together.

The former was pale with excitement and fatigue, the spray of the salt sea still in his beard and hair.

In fact, he had just been rowed into the harbor, through the darkness and storm, at great hazard, his ship being held off the dangerous coast by stress of weather.

He seemed to take in the full meaning of the dramatic situation at a single intuitive and comprehensive glance.

"Sir!" he began, advancing toward the table upon which the papers were lying, and stretching forth his hand; "Captain Freeway—"

"Lord Francis Oldcourt at present, or one day to be, usurper and impostor!" thundered the privateersman. "Scoundrel, you have known it from the first! These papers, even more indubitably than this heirloom signet on my hand—"

"Halt those papers!" and again the Britisher stretched out his greedy hand toward them.

"Just so," with a terrible smile. "They are at your spurious lordship's disposition, if—" Frank placed his hand upon his sword-hilt.

The other's eyes emitted a fierce joy; he was an expert swordsman.

"With all my heart!" he cried, likewise touching his blade. "Come on, rash boy."

"Florine, look to the papers!" called out Frank, while following him to the door. "And here is Horner, too, who loves you as none other ever can or will."

As the enemies rushed out of the apartment and out of the mansion to settle their controversy, the surrounding grounds were illuminated by the lightning's glare, the thunder was crashing, and the belated equinoctial tempest was at its fury-height.

When Frank Freeway returned alone, five minutes later, Horner, Florine and the physician were awaiting him in another chamber than the one of death.

The Privateersman Prince was again calm, his weapon once more within its sheath.

They all looked at him with such eager inquiry as required no tongue to voice it.

"Dead in the garden," was his simple response.

Later on, the old slave-woman Anala accosted her young master in one of the corridors.

"Oh, Marse Frank, I jess mus' done ax you de one ting!" she said. "What hab become ob dat big nigger, Milo, what yo' done kerry off to sea wif yer when yo' war hyar de las' time?"

"He met a brave sailor's death far hence, Anala," was the reply, "and is long since cradled in a sailor's grave. God be with him!"

On the following morning the fragments of a great shipwreck strewed the stormy Long Island beaches all the way from Shinnecock Bay to Bridgehampton Beach.

They were all that was left of the sloop-of-war Battle Queen, which went to pieces in the night, with the loss of all hands on board.

Frank Freeway and Jessie Hartwell were happily married directly at the conclusion of the war, during the remainder of which he continued his successes with his incomparable privateer with increasing brilliancy, and to the great renown and enrichment of himself and his gallant ship's company.

He then went with his bride to England, and, with but little difficulty, succeeded in proving his ancestral claims. While accepting of the estates, however, which he forthwith disposed of, he steadfastly, and even with something of American contempt, refused both name and title, the latter thereafter becoming extinct through lapse.

It was simply as republican Captain Frank Freeway, that he returned to his native land with his beautiful bride, settling down as a simple country gentleman under the free flag that he loved so well and had fought so nobly for upon the ocean blue, and at this day his descendants are numerous and honored in the land.

And the prime romantic figure of our stirring tale, the creature of mystery and sea-romance—Florine La Floramour, the Female Buccaneer—what of her?

Well, continued romance and mystery to the very end, that is all. She was, perhaps, the last of her wild, daring and terrible stock. Without waiting to afford Jessie or her new-found half-brother a parting farewell, she suddenly sailed with her midshipman-lover in her witch-craft, La Caracalla, and was never heard of again.

Let us hope that those two, likewise, had their day, protracted or brief, of wedded love and peace, their quiet earthly haven after their tumult, their passion, their unrest.

But none may say. Destroying Time has swept relentlessly on with his effacing, his all-obliterating scythe.

Even Torremento is long since the Lost Island in very truth, passed forevermore from the embosoming sea into the embosoming legend of storied wonders.

Was it suddenly or slowly ingulfed by one of the seismic convulsions that had so long haunted its mysterious ocean home? It will be never known. But it has since been searched for by persistent explorers in vain.

Sometimes a ghostly reminder of the once lovely isle may be presented in mirage—the mirages still continue. But the substantiality is gone; Torremento is no more; and this is

THE END.

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